

# ROBESONIAA

· FRIENDS OF THE ·

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Friends of the Robesonia Furnace, Inc. PO Box 162 • Robesonia, PA 19551-1230

## THOSE EARLY YEARS

*Burt D Webber Jr.*

The following are recollections written as they come to mind. At this point, nothing is categorized or in chronological order. This is something I intend to do at a later date. On a recent trip to Pennsylvania this year - 2017, my daughter Gretchen Manzella asked that I might write these memoirs to the interest of family members and friends.

Only recently I had the opportunity to tour the old "Webber House" on Furnace St (corner of Furnace and S Church St) one mile south of Robesonia, Pennsylvania. This is the house my parents bought in 1948 when I was six years old. Previously, we lived in Schaefferstown, Pa. approximately eleven miles away, where my father had the Buick & Pontiac dealership for 38 years. This business location was established by my uncle (my dad's brother) Lee Webber who then relocated to Myerstown, Pa. where he was the franchised Chevrolet dealer for fifty years before he sold out his interests to Eps Troutman. Both my dad and "uncle Lee" came into the automobile business through their uncle Paul Webber who had the Chrysler dealership in Rehrersburg, Pa. One might call it an automobile family.

I was born in Reading, Pa. December 10, 1942 in the St. Joseph Hospital. I recall my mother relating that I was a difficult delivery and she nearly died in the process. She remembered that while under the anesthesia she could see her sister Blanche at the top of the first hill on the right side of the picnic meadow lane, just after going through the old fence gate. She was telling my mother to climb the hill, saying come on Violet, come on, you can make it.

From infancy and on through my childhood I was plagued with asthma and severe allergies. My mother use to say she thought it had something to do with my having eaten a plant and some of the ground in a flower pot on a window sill, reachable from where my play pen was situated. I coped with these health issues well into my teens when finally these conditions slowly went into remission. When we moved to the house in Robesonia, this didn't help this health situation. Situated about 150 feet away from the house was the Pennsylvania German style two story barn. On the top was a large hay loft and on the bottom were the stalls where two of my sisters riding horses were kept. Mike and Dundee. I was allergic to both the hay and the horses.

Continued on page 2

## Those Early Years

Continued on from page 1

*Burt D Webber jr*

My parents had purchased the house from a Dr. Wims of whom I know little about. The house was built in 1820 as the residence for the grind mill attendant and his family. The structural ruins of the mill can still be found at the top of the road about 200 feet south of the house. Strange, when I think of it now, I never really gave thought as to the actual mill water power and how the spill flow worked, resulting in what we called "the falls" swimming hole. In the first year that we lived there, a considerable amount of renovation was done to the house both inside and out. The house was built of mountain stone with walls two and a half feet thick and had three fire places. One in the cellar which became my fathers den and trophy room, one in the dining room and one in the living room. Interestingly enough, even in the heat of the Summer the house inside remained somewhat cool.

As a child, growing up at the furnace was a truly special experience. A very different time comparatively speaking to the world we live in today. People were really people with expressive sensitivity and human compassion towards one another. My family included both my mom (Violet), my dad (Burt Sr.), sister Betty and brother Robert. I began first grade in the Robesonia town school which provided classes right on up to high school. The distance from our home to the school was approximately one mile and walking with a group of other kids living at the furnace was quite common place. Against my mother's wishes I rode a big boy tricycle I had gotten for Christmas all the way to school one morning and really thought I was a big deal having done it. In those days the furnace road from the location of the furnace mansion on down to town was nothing but fields and patches of woods. Along the east side of the road were varying types of fairly large trees which included cherry trees where, on the way back from school we'd stop and pick these cherries when in season. When I was about ten years old, I along with two other friends climbed up into one of those trees and while eating cherries, a car driven by some older kid we knew came down the road and we threw some cherries down which bounced off the windshield. No big deal we thought as we were only playing around. His response was to dramatically pull off the road into the weeds. When he did, unbeknown to him there was a low cut concealed tree stump which gouged the lower part of the front car door. We then realized we had really created a problem and climbed higher up into the tree with the feeling of not wanting to ever come down. I can't remember how that whole incident ever turned out. When walking home from school in Spring time we would pick Daffodils and Bluebells in a field located on the west side of the road between Brieninger's wooden mansion (then the Bittermans) and Moony Walkers house. A more modern home is now located in that field which was built in the late 50's or early 60's.

Summers at the furnace were always filled with activities and a lot of fun. Although my mom would always have chores for me to do, one of which was pulling weeds in her flower beds, I was nearly always across the street in the falls swimming hole. In those days the town of Robesonia had no public swimming pool so not only the kids that lived around the furnace but many of town kids would come to swim there. Come the beginning of the summer, it was routine for most of the "furnace kids" to get together and rebuild the dam wall of rocks which of course increased the depth of the swimming area. The water was cold but very clear. The only issue was the fact that in the one corner of the wall there was a water snake den. Early in the morning before anyone came to swim I'd shoot one or two using my .22 cal. rifle.

Continued on page 3

*Burt D Webber Jr*

The Falls was significant in my life because this is where my sister Betty taught me to swim when I was six years old. When I was about ten years old, Richard Garrett and I felled birch trees up in the woods and constructed a raft. We pulled it down to the Falls and launched it. I remember it was a day in early Spring and the weather was cold as was the water. I don't remember why but Richard declined to get on so taking off my shoes and rolling up my pants, I got on and using a poll I pushed myself into the center of the deeper water pool. I was having a wonderful adventurous time of it but concerned that my parents might find out what I was doing without their permission.

Mr. Price, the bread delivery man, pulled up in front of the house and took notice that there were a couple of kids standing up on the bridge watching something so he walked over to see. When he saw what I was doing, he went to the house and told my mother who immediately came over to the bridge and actually didn't seem too upset. She knew I could swim, I was obviously having fun but she did comment that the water had to be very cold and I should come home and change out of my wet pants.

Never did a swimming day pass by without playing water tag in and out of the water. That included diving off the high rail of the bridge, the rock point and hiding under the water falls. By the time I was eight years old, I was already diving off of these highest points and my dad use to come over with an occasional house visitor or business associate and proudly ask me to perform. As a boy, I thought these dive-off points were high but I look at them today and they don't seem high at all.

The Falls would be the first place that I began to use mask and fins to free dive in this shallow depth. At that time I may have been about ten years old. I use to take a fishnet down to the bottom (the water was relatively clear) and on each dive, holding my breath, I'd select small colorful stones to put into the net as though these were some kind of treasure. When I was sixteen, I'd make my first dive there using my first SCUBA tank with a Northhill two hose regulator. Against my parents wishes, I bought the dive gear by selling the coin collection I had.

With the summers, living in a home built at the base of a small mountain peak, along came the Copperhead snakes. Actually, it became commonplace and looking back now I can't help but wonder how none of us were even bitten. My mom would be working in her flower beds when suddenly we'd hear a scream - "a Copperhead". Usually, it was either my brother or I would grab a .22 rifle or the 410 single barrel shotgun and quickly dispatch the intruder. At given times, they could be found anywhere on the property. Around the house or barn or occasionally crossing the road. When considering how common place Copperhead encounters were, I would have assumed this would be a continuing experience with future occupants of the property after my parents sold it in 1972. Such was not the case. I had the opportunity to visit with the second family to have occupied the house since my parents had moved temporarily to Schaefferstown. The husband was an Eastern Airline pilot but was not present when the wife cordially showed I and another family member through the house. I somewhat reluctantly asked her if they had any snake encounters in the spring/summer since they lived there? She seemed surprised at the question. Snakes? "Oh, perhaps on a rare occasion we may have seen a Garter snake but never a Copperhead" This surprised me. I can only attribute this sudden change to the intense rain and flooding which occurred in Pennsylvania as a result of Hurricane Agnes in 1972. This in all probability flooded the snake dens thus killing off the Copperheads.

Continued on page 5

**Membership Renewal Form**  
**(Check your mailing label for your current date of membership)**

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone Number \_\_\_\_\_

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| Yearly Amount Level                         |                             | One Time Amount Level             |  |
|---|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| \$ 10.00 _____ Individual                   | \$ 25.00 _____ Contributing | \$ 100.00 _____ Life Member       |  |
| \$ 20.00 _____ Family                       | \$ 50.00 _____ Sponsor      |                                   |  |
| *Memberships for 2018 expires Dec. 31, 2018 |                             | *All donations are tax deductible |  |

Please make checks payable and send along with Membership Form to Friends of the Robesonia Furnace, P.O. Box 162 Robesonia PA 19551-0162



Photo Credit– Nick Moyer  
<https://hiveminer.com/User/NickMoyer>

The “Falls” at the Robesonia Furnace. Originally created to harness the Furnace Creeks flowing waters to power furnace operations including the grist mill, via a spill flow wheel. The retaining wall was significantly higher, creating a deep pool and larger “falls”. This is where the beginnings of Burt Webber Jr’s love for water exploration began. Burt went on to be regarded as one of the worlds greatest divers, reaching international acclaim in 1978 when he discovered the sunken Spanish Galleon ship, the Concepcion, which sank in 1641.

## Those Early Years

Continued on from page 3

*Burt D Webber Jr*

About one hundred yards north of the house was what we called the "lot". This was a half acre plot that my dad planted every spring/summer season. We raised sweet corn, potatoes, carrots, tomatoes, peppers, string beans, squash, and a variety of other miscellaneous vegetables. At given times, weekly throughout the summer I'd have to help with the row hoeing and weeding. When the harvesting of the various vegetables took place, usually Betty and I (can't remember Roberts participation too much?) would sit on the back door patio and husk the corn and end-snap the green beans. In the summer we always had an abundance of sweet corn which was served with meals at least three times in a week. The vegetables not freshly consumed would be prepared and "canned" (jarred) and stored in the house cellar. Potatoes, carrots, turnips, etc. were stored in what we called the cold cellar located down by the lot near the furnace creek.

One summer day, I walked down to the lot carrying my 25 lb. pull bow with arrows. I immediately sighted a chicken that had just slipped through a small opening in the fence that divided our farming lot from that of Howard Spade who lived in what was once their iron furnace office building. The chicken was obviously scratching the soil in a freshly planted row for seed or earth worms. At a distance of an estimated two hundred feet, I took aim and with a maximum pull on the bow string, I let loose an arrow and to my surprise hit the chicken killing it instantly. I couldn't believe it. As a kid, I kind of felt like I was a Robin Hood. Now the immediate worry of; I killed one of "Spady's" chickens. Well, it was on our side of the fence in our lot, so why not. I still remember taking the chicken and putting it over the fence onto his side just in front of the hole in the fence where it had come through.

Having now mentioned Howard Spade, I will provide further particulars about this strange but most memorable character. The Spade family; Howard, wife and daughter lived in the old iron furnace office directly across the road from the mansion. "Spady", as we referred to him tilled the soil of one might call a little farm directly behind his house and adjoining our vegetable garden lot I have already described. Spady had alot more dialog with my older brother Robert and the Garrett brothers than he did with me. One day they were conversing with him talking about small game hunting and shotguns. "Spady" told them when shooting at squirrels high up in a tree or a pheasant on the flight, this was bad for the gun as it "strained" the barrel. He had many peculiar explanations for various things including night time space invaders. One of the funniest recollections I have was when David Thompson, Johnny Garrett and I walked by his roadside barn while he was pitching hay. (Spady's barn was the old iron furnace firehouse). We couldn't believe our eyes. He was wearing a long sleeved dress shirt and neck tie but what was most shocking, he had another neck tie adorning his back as well. When we asked him about that, I said, well why not. That's to keep hay and dust from going down the back of my collar. Well, that was Spady. On a far more serious note, he was very knowledgeable about things of nature and apparently an expert bee keeper. One time my mom chanced upon a large mass of honey bees in a bush just above the back yard pavilion. We contacted Spady who came and masterfully removed the entire mass which he took to his little farm.

Dad being the avid small and big game hunter that he was, raised Robert and I with a love of the out doors and taught both of us the respect for and usage of firearms. Exclusively rifles and shot guns. He wasn't much into the use of revolvers or pistols. We did very little hunting on the Furnace property, with the exception of occasionally shooting squirrels in the high trees behind the barn. All our small game hunting was done seasonally out on the Rehrersburg Farm property where, in the future, we would build three family homes. As for big-game hunting, my dad would go annually to British Colombia to hunt Elk, Mountain Goat and Moose. He never missed the Pennsylvania Bear and Deer hunting seasons, the hunts of which were always "up-state" in Lycoming or Potter County. This is where my brother Robert would meet Dotty Tome and spend the rest of his life in Pennsylvania State Forestry Service.

# Summer Show 2018

AUGUST 25TH, 2018 9AM TO 3PM



The Friends will hold an all new annual Summer Show on August 25th 2018 to help raise funds for displays in the museum and for capital improvements to the grounds. This year is the 125th Anniversary of the Pioneer Hose Company and we have a display set up in honor of their anniversary . We have returning artists Barbara Strawser with her beautiful Folk Art paintings, and her son Daniel Strawser, Jr. with his wonderful wood carvings and Tramp Art. New to the show is Wes Muckey, owner/potter with Nolde Forest Pottery and Shannon Haag, owner/artist with her vintage finds. The show is going to try to offer a little something for everyone!



As we lived next to our beautiful mountain stream “Furnace Creek”, dad taught us to fish for Trout. I actually started when I was six years old and truly loved it. The creek's head waters began three miles south of the house in the meadows. The usual procedure was that we'd drive up to that location, park the car and walk down into the woods where the creek began to widen coming out of the meadow. Sometimes my mom would take us in her car and drop us off. We'd then fish down stream for the three miles, eventually winding up at the Falls in front of our home. The usual catch was native Brook Trout but in the lower sections of the creek, one would also catch stocked Trout provided by the Robesonia Rod & Gun Club having built a Trout hatchery along the small meadow just above the house on the east side of the road.

Raised as an out door person, following in the footsteps of my dad and some of the things he did as a boy, I learned to trap game animals just as my brother Robert did also. As our area was woodland with few meadows, catching Muskrats was not too common although I did usually catch a few in the very short stretch of a little stream in the meadow next to the trout hatchery. Trapping for Raccoons along both Big Creek and Little Creek was the usual, using canned sardines for bait. Besides catching Raccoons, Opossum and Skunks were also common. The price paid for these animal pelts was, at the time, a fair income especially for a young school boy. Although I loved the being out doors aspect and challenge of trapping I took no pleasure in taking the lives of these animals, especially a Raccoon. Looking back at it all now, I would never want to trap again. There was one aspect of trapping that I truly found challenging, that being the ability to out fox the fox. This animal along with being beautiful is very smart and wary of humans. I caught my first one, surprisingly in a two trap drag set which I made in a little grassy area one the left, just before what was called the water company road which went east off the main road and then turned south along the Big Creek. Right there, once visible (now filled in) was the stone cellar foundation of a very little cottage that my grandmother use to say was where a old black man once lived. He worked at the iron furnace and had a bad noticeable cancer. He eventually died there. I use to dig in those cellar ruins and would find various types of odd old medicine bottles. Back to the trapping. Although the set was carefully made, my intent was to catch a raccoon, never expecting to actually catch a grey fox as I did. I remember being so proud, and couldn't wait to tell my mom and dad and the kids in my class at school. I might have been in the 5th or 6th grade then. Other kids and adults who trapped then just didn't catch the fox. Rarely if ever. As I then found Fox trapping to be a real challenge, I began to study the animals habits and the artificial methods of duplicating the way a fox would bury bits of leftover food. It's called the “dirt hole” set.

My dad had an acquaintance that lived in Litiz, Pa. His name was Andy Bauer a German master fox trapper who use to catch close to a hundred fox per season. Fox pelts at that time were not worth very much but the state of Pennsylvania was paying a \$4.00 bounty as were each local Rod & Gun Club one belonged to. I belonged to two. In the 1950's, \$12.00 dollars per fox was a considerable amount money. I successfully trapped fox into my young adulthood (if and when I was back home in Pa.) but had slowly lost interest in hunting. (To be continued...)

**Continue reading Burt Webber Jr's “Those Early Years” in the next issue of the Robesonia Furnace Newsletter**

Friends of the Robesonia Furnace  
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In this issue, we feature Robesonia native Burt Webber Jr, best known for best known for his 1978 discovery and salvage of the *Concepcion*, a Spanish galleon ship that sank off the coast of the Dominican Republic in 1641. Burt recently and most graciously shared his memories of 'The Early Years' and his fond recollections of the unique and historic area of the Robesonia Furnace. This will be a two part series, continuing in the next issue of the Newsletter-



Burt Webber Jr, circa 1961