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"Your dad was the only one of the ten children that wasn't born in Turtle Lake, Wisconsin. He never lived in Wisconsin, but now you will. You're going home."

It was with those words that I embarked in 1997 on a journey home to Wisconsin, to the place of my roots of over 100 years earlier. My husband had just accepted a job in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, about an hour south of Green Bay on the Lake Michigan shoreline. I had never heard of Sheboygan, and I had barely an idea of where Wisconsin was located.

I had lived my first 42 years in Cleveland, Ohio – the place of my birth, schooling including college, first 15 years of my marriage, the place where my only son was born, where my dear school friends and scores of Leisz family relatives resided. It was a place of comfortable familiarity, where I felt at home, knew the lay of the land and the people who lived there.

But Wisconsin! That was another story. And yet it was comforting to know that my dad's extended family hailed from there. The words above were spoken to me by his nieces and nephews, my cousins on the Leisz side. There are over 100 of us cousins, the children of eight Leisz siblings who were the offspring of Joseph and Louise Leisz. Born in the late 1800s in Hungary, Joseph and Louise had met and married in Wisconsin in the area of Turtle Lake near Eau Claire.

Joseph and Louise had ten children in all, and nine of those were born in Turtle Lake. Only the youngest, John Leopold, was born elsewhere – in Cleveland, Ohio in 1921.

Cleveland was where the Joseph Leisz family had moved to in 1918 after the deadly 1917/18 Influenza outbreak claimed the lives of two of their ten children – Theresa and Frank. Because Turtle Lake was so sparsely populated and medical care was virtually non-existent, Joseph and Louise lost two of their precious children, both succumbing in one awful fever-filled night. It was then that mother Louise insisted that her family abandon their meager farming existence and move to a more developed area – a place where they could obtain medical care when needed, and live a more secure life than the one that the farming life in Turtle Lake could provide. Had they lived elsewhere when the flu struck, Louise reasoned, then she and husband Joseph might not have lost two children to the flu.

And so the family – seven remaining children and parents Joseph and Louise – and moved to Cleveland, Ohio in 1918, a place where Louise's relatives, including half-brother Louis, had settled earlier. It was there that their final child, my father Jack, was born in 1921.

My dad John, better known as Jack or Jackie, did visit Turtle Lake during his lifetime. It was during his teen years in 1935 or 36, recalls my eldest Leisz cousin, Bill Waters, son of Mary (Marie) Leisz Waters Lucas.

Bill, 69, was about four years old at the time, but vividly recalls the trip he and family members made west from Cleveland to visit Turtle Lake. Among them were his two uncles, Jack (about 15 at the time) and Joe (about 25 years old), plus Bill's grandma Louise.

The family in Wisconsin loaded up the visitors for their trip home with home grown treats including popcorn, butter and cheese. Bill remembers the long car trip home on dirt roads piled in an old-fashioned "horseless carriage." The family had rigged up two expandable accordin-like holders to span the width of the car's running boards and contain the food during the drive home to Cleveland, as there was no room in the auto with all the passengers on board.

As the car sped along dirt roads, Bill recalls other vehicles were honking at them. But the passengers in the Leisz car didn't understand why - until they smelled something foul, a burning odor that wasn't coming from the engine. It was then that they noticed the food atop the running boards had caught fire!

It seems that Bill's uncle Joe had tossed a cigarette out the window a way's back, igniting the foodstuffs. The popcorn was popping, the butter melting, and all was creating quite a sight for passing motorists! What a trip to Wisconsin that was for the Cleveland Leisz clan!