

Growing Up in Western New York

by

William E. Farnham

I was born February 9th, 1927 in the Town of Sheridan in a farmhouse on Kuhrt Road . The address was Forestville, N.Y. No zip code then. I think I am the only person ever born in this house. Dad and Mom had built the house only a year or so before I was born. I believe Ted and Bob, my brothers, were born across the street in the farmhouse known as the Cole farm. Grandpa and Grandma Farnham rented that place and when Dad and Mom were married, they lived in that house, along with the grandparents and several of Dad's relatives. I am not positive about this, but I believe Uncle Phil, Aunt Gladys, Aunt Violet and Aunt Marion, also lived in this house. That makes about ten people living in a house with maybe four bedrooms, no running water no central heat, no indoor bathroom. They did have electricity and free natural gas for heat. The new house had running water and bath, gas heat. The gas was free, because there was a well drilled on the farm. The farm was primarily a grape farm there was open land on both sides of the road for growing other crops. Dad and Mom bought the land on the North side of the road and built the house. Dad and Grandpa Farnham built the house. There was a large barn on the North side and Dad kept a few cows and a team of horses. I'm sure we had names for the cows, but my memory left me. The horses were Dick and Maude. Before the folks bought the farm, I believe Dad & Grandpa leased both sides of the road, known as the Cole farm. After they bought the farm I'm not sure what if any part Grandpa had in the running of the farm.

The main income was from grapes and there was an organization that took the grapes packed fresh in baskets. Times were good and so the folks were able to make a living. At some point Jack Lyons put up a sawmill on the South side of the street. They hauled ash logs to the mill and sawed them into four- inch squares. They were then shipped out and made into Louisville slugger bats. Since I was very young at the time, this mill was a huge interest to me. I spent a lot of time there and the workers were good to me, they even let me help pile up the squares to be shipped. The mill was run by a steam engine, which was fired by the scrap wood from the logs. Every so often, the smokestack on the boiler had to be taken down and cleaned. One time when this happened the smoke stack was laying flat on the ground. Mom had just got me ready in a white outfit to go shopping. I walked over to the mill before we left. The workers dared me to crawl through the pipes, which I did. Needless to say, Mom was just a little upset, but the guys thought it was really funny.

One of the drivers who hauled logs to the mill, was Ray Siddall. He and Aunt Marion, who lived at the farm, started going together and soon married. The mill was in

operation for a couple of years. Grandpa and Grandma moved down the road to the Merritt house and the house there was empty for a while, until the Wilkinson's moved in. They had two children Rita and Sherrill. Rita was Bob's age and Sherrill was my age. I remember Bert sold Watkins products for a while. He worked later at Town's Feed Mill for many years.

About 1936, Uncle Raymond Kuhrt and Aunt Rita bought the farm on the south side of the road. Faith and Cathryn, their children lived at the farm in the warm weather and in the fall they would go to St. Augustine Florida for the cold weather. Aunt Rita was artistic and was forever having us kids put on productions. She even made a movie. Faith and Cathryn would go to school with us at the country one-room school, while they were here. We enjoyed many happy days with them and also all the neighborhood kids.

Our school was a one-room schoolhouse located on Downer road. We had one teacher, who taught all eight grades. There was a gas stove for heat and a gas stove in the kitchen. The water came from a well with a hand pump. We had an outhouse for a john. We had a varying amount of kids at the school, depending on who had moved in as hired men and their families, on the neighboring farms. Junior, we always called Ted "Junior" until he finally went to Forestville to school and they called him Ted. So from then on he wanted to be called Ted. We walked the mile to school. The school-yard was ringed with big old maple trees. These trees would be our Gym. During recess we went out and climbed the trees. In the winter, the teacher would let us take turns making lunch, usually soup. This is my first memory of alphabet soup. Later the local people joined together and installed running water and added two bathrooms.

Lynn Hawkins owned the farm next to the school. He raised Guernsey cattle and also race horses. In the fall they would fill the silos with corn. It took them weeks and I can still hear the hum of the cutters as they chopped up the corn and blew it into the silos. Lynn was known not only for his farm, but also for the rich women he was able to attract. He had a model from New York City who was his "secretary". She drove around in a Cadillac convertible. One day Ted and I were hoeing in the garden, by the side of the road at Granma Kuhrt's. She drove by with the top down and Ted whistled at her. To his amazement she stopped and backed up and asked if there was something he wanted.

Grandpa and Grandma Kuhrt, lived just a little ways from our farm, on Downer road. Uncle Reuben and Aunt Florence lived across the street from them. Uncle Reuben and Grandpa Kuhrt had grapes and also dairy cattle. Grandpa Kuhrt's name was William. I was named after him and I couldn't be prouder. Grandma Kuhrt's name was Elizabeth. They had these children. Reuben, Raymond, William, Ethlyn, mom, twins Marguerite and Marjorie. They all lived in this beautiful old country home they didn't have running water and they did have an out-door john. He came from Germany as a young man. I believe he was sixteen. He was a hard working kindly man. He was also proud of his family. He must have learned English in school in Germany, because I never heard him speak in German. Since I was only ten when he died, I don't have very many memories

of him. However, this one incident happened, that I will always remember. They had a German police dog , who always slept by the back door to the house. One day I went to go in the backdoor and Rex grabbed me by the nose. It was probably my fault, but Rex took the fall. Grandpa took him out behind the barn and gave a good thrashing. I was always really good to Rex after that. I also remember grandpa sitting behind the stove in the dining room soaking up the heat to relieve his sinus headaches. He died in 1937 from a farm accident or stroke, nobody knew for sure which. The work on the farm was mostly all done by hand. They had an old tractor, but most of the work was done with a team of horses. I have often wished that he could have seen the mechanical grape-picker work. Grandma's maiden name was Massman. Her sister Mary lived with them most of the time. Grandma was a typical hardworking farm lady. She lived to be in her ninety's and the last several years of her life, she was blind, but still active. She dearly loved all of her Children and grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. She made her own soap. Canned vegetables.

They made butter and would peddle eggs and butter and vegetables in Dunkirk on Saturday's. They always bought groceries at Sullivan's Market on Lincoln Ave. in Dunkirk. Years later when Mr. Sullivan operated a small restaurant on Lake Shore Drive, I used to stop in there frequently and when he found out I was related to the Kuhrt's, he couldn't find enough kind words about them. When they butchered she canned the meat, made sausage, salted hams, which were then smoked in the smoke house with corn- cobs. She was a great cook and in addition she helped to tie the grapes in the spring and pick them in the fall. She took care of a huge garden and several different kinds of berries. In addition to the grapes and dairy, they also had pigs, sheep, chickens, ducks, geese, guinea hens, and when Uncle Ray lived at the house he had homing pigeons, golden pheasants, turkeys, peacocks and other birds. At one point, Uncle Ray raised turkeys, ducks and geese and sold them during Holidays fresh dressed. When us kids were old enough, we got to help pluck feathers.

Up the hill from the Kuhrt farm, Ted and Alfreda Berndt lived. They had a daughter Marie who went through school with us. The next place down the road was Ernest and Martha Berndt. They had three children, Edmund, Arthur, and Berdina. Berdina went to school with us also. Edmund and Arthur were older. Edmund was married and taught school in Stockton, N.Y. Arthur also taught school and lived with his parents about that time. He later married Helen and moved to his own place. The Berndt's were related to us. The next farm was the Donohues. Ernest Donohue raised grapes and apples. His wife taught school. They had a daughter Dolores, who was younger than us. Their farm joined ours on the north side. Their grapes rows were perpendicular to our farm line. One year Ernest dragged his grape brush out on to dad's meadow and burned it there. About the next day, Dad built a lane fence down the farm line, so when Ernest came down his rows of grapes he could not turn on the end of the rows. He had to cut back his rows, so he could make the turn.

Growing Up In Western New York Part Two

In this part of this story, I will concentrate on the family of Theodore and Ethelyn Farnham. We were a happy family of Mom, Dad, brothers Ted, Bob, Bill, and Ralph. Things would change for us as they did for many others. It was the big depression. The folks could no longer make enough income to pay the mortgage on the farm. Dad tried every which way to survive. In order to market the grapes, they were packed in small splint baskets, made in Forestville. He had a truck with high wracks on it. He built them himself. The baskets were loaded on the truck and he would head for little towns in Pennsylvania and sell the grapes right off the back of the truck. Then he would head for a coal mine and load on coal to take back for customers. He didn't have to load the coal but it didn't unload itself. That's where we became acquainted with a scoop shovel. In the spring of the year he would haul bulk limestone to area farmers. Again the scoop shovel was the order of the day. Dad and Mom worked together as a team. Dad did the heavy farm work and Mom did the housework, took care of us kids and worked in the vineyards. Dad was a self trained mechanic, carpenter and you name it, he could do it. It was unusual if on a weekend, someone was not there to have Dad take a look at their car or tractor or other farm tool. Mom and Mrs. Nelson picked most of the grapes in the fall. I was too young to go to school and they would put me on the bottom of the grape picking stand and let me ride while they picked grapes. No baby sitter was needed.

For recreation they played cards or listened to radio programs, one of the programs was the Lucky Strike Hit Parade. We had a player piano with lots of rolls of music. We played that a lot until it bit the dust. None of us ever learned to play the piano. I remember Dad letting me stay up until ten o'clock one night to listen to a Joe Louis boxing match. The cards they played were with Nelson and Myrtle Merritt. They lived about a mile west of us on Downer road by the Tookes old wooden railroad bridge. This old bridge had planks for flooring and every time a car went over it you could hear it a long ways away. The railroad was the old Erie road. Which went from Dunkirk to Salamanca. In the summer, they would haul pulpwood from Canada to a paper mill in Salamanca. It was an old steam engine and we would watch for it every day. The Merritts had Hilda, Betty-Ann, Robert, Patricia and Dick. They were all about the same age as us kids. The folks usually played bridge with the Merritts. The kids from the visiting family came along and played games like monopoly until we got tired and would go to a corner and sleep until the folks finished their bridge game. Then there would be a feast of sandwiches and usually cake and jello. What a feast. No matter how hard money was to come by, there was always plenty of good food to eat. Mom's reputation for her homemade bread came early. With four hungry boys, she baked a lot of bread. We never did get much store bought bread. We carried our lunch to school. My good friend and classmate Charley Falcone would want swap his store bought bread for my homemade bread.

Somewhere in this time frame, I think about 1932, Dad and Uncle Ray Siddall went together and bought a new Dodge Tractor and trailer and got a franchise with Inter state

Motor Freight, to haul freight for them. I can still remember Dad bringing the new truck home and parking it in our yard. They worked together until they realized that there was not enough money in one truck for two family's. Dad sold out to Uncle Ray. He drove truck for other owners and also Uncle Ray over the years. During this time on the farm, we either had a hired man or Ted, Bob and I got to do the farming. One of the hired men was Bert Darling. He was a terrible tempered old coot. He had an old Star car, which he spent most of his time tinkering with. Several times we watched him take a hammer and start pounding on his car if he couldn't make it work. By this time Ted and Bob were old enough to milk the cows. My job was throw down the ensilage and feed the cows and the horses, and also clean the stables. We didn't have a place to cool the milk. Every day we would take the cans of milk to Gramma's spring house and put the milk there to cool. This where the story about the milk stick came into play. The cans of milk were not always filled. Dad fashioned a measuring stick out of one-quarter inch oak, with marks from top to bottom for each quart. Then we could measure how much milk was in the can. With Dad Being away so much, this milk stick became Mom's persuasion stick. It never got used, but was topic all of our lives. Dad had made a jalopy tractor to use on the farm we used this to carry the cans of milk to the spring house. The jalopy was an old car stripped down with a double transmission and could be used as a tractor. Us kids didn't have a go-cart, but we had this jalopy and we found many excuses to use it.

This life went on until about 1938 and the folk's lost the farm. We moved to Forestville and rented a home. This was a great part of my growing up. My life as I knew it abruptly changed. I still feel the hurt of losing something that meant so much. There have been lots of if only's in the years after. I never pass by the farm without a pang of sadness. Dad and Mom took this huge hit on the chin and never looked to anyone for help. They could easily have applied for welfare, many of our new neighbors did. They learned to cope with the problems and fight their own battles. I will try to write more in a part three soon. If you have a little bit of blood in you, that comes from these two, count your lucky stars, because they were the very best.