

The Old Place

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2007

We drove up the hill and around a small curve in the driveway and I saw the house for the first time. This was in June 1956. I was not impressed. As a matter of fact, it was just about what I had expected to see, so I wasn't disappointed, either. Uncle Jess and Aunt Billie had been telling me and my brother, Daryn, all about the place for the past two days. They had picked us up in California, where we arrived from Syracuse, New York and drove us to our new home in Oregon. I knew they wanted us to be happy and were trying to prepare us as best as they could. Still, the first look at what they called the big house on the hill was kinda like seeing one of the old houses that got condemned and then torn down to make room for a new housing project in Syracuse.

Drab didn't describe it. It was more like SHEESH!!! Doors sagged on the garage, or what I figured to be a garage, any way. The screen on the front door had a really big hole in it and when I later opened the door I notice the screen itself was all but rusted out. The last paint this house had seen must have been in Tom Sawyer's day, whitewash maybe. No, there was a hint of some dark color on the trim work, what there was of that. It was almost too dark to see much but even so I could tell that the place needed a lot of help. The roof on the pump house must have been tarred over at least a half dozen times. More tar than shingle. I bet it dripped on a hot summer's day.

Grandma Annie and Grandpa Rudy came down the stairs to welcome us. Grandma was bigger than Grandpa, I could tell that alright. A little later I counted the stairs, of which there were seven, then a landing, a sharp turn to the left, and seven more. When I ran up the stairs to go into the house I was afraid the sagging and groaning steps would break under Grandma and she would fall through, or maybe the whole thing would fall down, but we made it to the top without anything happening. I saw the handrails move around when I looked back down and watched her work her way up the narrow passageway. I was glad I was ahead of her on the steps. During all the years I lived there with her I never heard her complain about the stairs, except to say on that day she was glad she would no longer be the one filling the wood box on the back stairway. Yup, more steps in the back, but not as many. As young as I was, I got the message she had aimed right at me.

Inside the house smelled like nothing I had ever smelled before. More than musty, musty means old, closed up, moldy sort of, to me. This had a sharper odor, more like a feel to it than a smell. Eventually I learned it was a combination of wood smoke, Grandpa's cigarettes, Grandma's perfume and I suspected her stockings as well. There were these stocking things always hanging over the tub that Daryn and I hoped would not drip as we took our baths, which Grandma insisted we take every other day. Seemed to me the same stockings hung there for four years. They never seemed to change shape or position on the curtain rod, which was there only for the stockings I guess, because there was no shower, only the tub.

Two older people, living far differently than anyone I had previously known. And this was to be my home, mine and Daryn's. The odd smells eventually disappeared or else I just got used to them. I did get assigned the job of keeping the wood box on the back porch full in the winter. Daryn did dishes and helped Grandma with her house work and anything else she needed. I got to help Grandpa. It always seemed to me that he needed more help than Grandma did because

Daryn always seemed to get to play more than I did. Anyway, we got used to them, they got used to us, which I now suspect was harder for them than us. I had no big troubles with either Grandma or Grandpa. Grandma was rather strict, we thought. That may have been because we had very little “tough love” to compare to.

There were four outbuildings. The previously mentioned pump house, which I had been so happy to see and recognize as such because of the old taped up hose hanging on a nail on the side towards the house. At least there was well water that got pumped . I had envisioned Oregon as wilderness when we were first told we were going there to live and Mother had tried to tell us a bit about her parents and their home. Here was a well without the bucket hanging over it. But another outbuilding turned out to be an outhouse. Water to the house, yes, but to a tub and the kitchen only, at that time. Another outbuilding was another outhouse...two outhouses? The second one had been converted, though, to a chicken coop. It was fun to learn that our new home was a one-time schoolhouse, hence the two outhouses. Girls and boys, it still said on the doorway of each...with the writings on the walls of the boys outhouse having the most to say, I thought, anyway. And four holes...four holes....could not get over an outhouse with four holes. I had gone to a one room school in New York for a short time but must not have been impressed with that outhouse because I couldn't remember it. You would never forget this one if you saw it. Small wonder there was no toilet in the bathroom. Grandpa had this perfectly operating outhouse...no need for indoor services. That finally changed, though, because Grandma convinced Grandpa that we needed an indoor toilet. The bathroom soon became more than just a place to take a bath. He even put in a shower and Grandma's stockings eventually disappeared, too. The fourth outbuilding was a combination tool shed/ wood shed. I was not allowed in the tool shed end unless I was with Grandpa. He was very protective of his tools but he sure didn't protect that old axe in the other part of the shed...let me use it every day. Split the kindling, even learned to make smaller pieces out of some of the larger ones but most of the larger ones were too tough for me. Ever try splitting dry oak or madrone...with big knots in them?

Over the years I learned that I needed not to have worried about the repairs the old place begged. My grandpa was a master carpenter. That meant that he could do it all, from the framing of walls to the finishing of the sills. Good thing, cause the old place needed it all. I helped grandpa do many things to the house. We put a new roof on once, right under the old roof and then tore down the old roof. One day I was helping him and I was wearing my “go-aheads”. These were like sandals with a thong that went between your two biggest toes. Go-aheads cause you couldn't walk backwards in them without walking out of them. At least we called them go-aheads in New York. You may know them as flip-flops or just simply thongs. You can still find them around and they are fairly cheap I think because they are always breaking ...don't last long. Maybe I am just too hard on shoes, like Grandma always said. Anyway, during one of the days I spent up there in the heat, and it was hot between those two roofs with no air moving about, I lost my go-aheads down a wall. I was sweating out the gallons of lemonade Grandma made for me while Daryn made sure he was down there where I would see him swinging on the tire swing. How come Grandpa didn't sweat? Because he drank beer instead of the lemonade? Anyway, I sweat a lot, and my sweaty feet allowed those go-aheads to just slide right off and down the wall they went. I think to this day they were the only insulation in those walls. I lost a couple of Grandpa Rudy's hammers and maybe a crow bar or two down the walls also. He once accused me of losing my hammer so I could go swimming at Jump Off Joe with the rest of the kids. Maybe that was why there were soon cheaper tools around that he allowed me to use, and I could lose them

whenever I wanted to. He now always had a replacement. It got harder and harder to get away, but he always rewarded me if I made it through the day without losing my tools.

Grandpa also taught me how to blow my nose without taking time out to find a snot rag. You just sort of covered one nostril, and gave a blow and then switched nostrils. Works pretty good. I still use this method when I am fishing, sometimes, and don't want to set my pole down. Some things you learn while working can be useful. What a thing to have reminding you of your Grandpa, hey? My wife, Linda, wanted me to leave this part out of my story but I think it belongs. Don't you?

Just the other day I went up to look at the old house. I could see that new roof. Over there is the laurel tree with the big tire swing hanging on a rather ratty looking rope. The added-on kitchen over the car port, joining the tool shed to the main building. The new board sheathing on the tool shed. Down there in the front yard is the TV antenna that Grandma made me cart all over God's little acre looking for the best possible reception, which was never found. Out back is that old outhouse with my marble collection down in the depths of the number two hole. Up there is the chicken house where Grandpa once killed a cougar, and where we once kept a tame deer, tame we knew because he wore someone's red collar. One day we let him go and he hung around eating chicken feed but eventually disappeared. I often suspected Grandpa and his 22 rifle. But that 22 is another story. Over there is the tall grass and bunches of daffodils that grow on top of the barrels grandpa has buried to catch his grey water. Under the house is Grandma's washroom with her very old wringer type washer and the musty...this time really musty, smelling garage with its sloping dirt floor and everybody in the family's odd stuff stored there. But on this day, in early May of 2004, I see all this in my mind's eye because the place is gone, as I now see for real...everything this day is gone, except for a pile of debris about to be burned and there...yes... the pump house still squats. Three Pines School House remains there yet for me and maybe for you also, if you were fortunate enough to have seen it and perhaps if we are really lucky, saved in some photos of yours and mine.