

My House at 507 East 2nd Street - Reminiscences

The house at 507 East 2nd where I grew up was a roomy, seven-bedroom, two-story house that was a hub of bustling activity for a three-generation family. In those days, it was a prime location, meaning easy walking distance to St. Stan's church and school, work (Peerless Chain and Bay State Milling), grocery stores (Vince's, Tushners, and Govins), the playground (East End Recreation Center), the Mississippi River, and of course the tavern (Loshek's) on the corner.

A cousin told me that after Grandpa Nick bought the house, he incorporated into it two rooms from his bride's house, which was moved up from Front Street. Along with Grandma Mary and the two-room home, came my Grandmother's half-brother, Martin (Skorpy) Wojciechowski because after all it was his home as well. Dad bought the house from Grandpa in the early 1940s with the promise that Grandpa and his brother-in-law could live in the house as long as they wanted. And it was in these two rooms behind the kitchen where Grandpa and Skorpy lived when I was little. Grandma Mary had died many years earlier.

Then, shortly after I was born, Dad's two brothers, Dan and Louis, came home after the war. Louis did not stay in the house for long. He soon lit out to the Cities for a job in a lumber company owned by a good buddy of his in the army. Dan, on the other hand, went to a hotel in La Crosse instead of coming home. As soon as Dad got word of this, he jumped in his car and drove to La Crosse to tell Dan to come home. Uncle Dan was installed in a cheery bedroom upstairs facing south. He bought himself an accordion so he could make a hit with the ladies. Myron Florin he was not. His practicing was hard on the ears. So much so that my little brother, maybe three or four at the time, climbed upstairs to interrupt with this famous question: "Uncle Din, are you goofy?" I am sure Mike remained my uncle's favorite nephew.

For many years after the war, we needed a roomy seven-bedroom house for my parents and their five kids, my dad's father and uncle and brother. My mother was cooking and housekeeping for everyone, although on occasion she did get help with the housework. I asked my mother if she minded the huge household and all the work; and to my surprise she said no. Grandma thought Dad was working Mom to death, but obviously not. Mom died at 95, Dad at 64. Mom said she thought the men in the house were very courteous. Louis, when he stayed for a short period after the war, was especially helpful. Skorpy would pat her on the back when she needed a morale boost. One evening, Mom was on the warpath because Dad was late and loaded coming home after a union meeting. Dad asked what was for supper, and quick as a wink Skorpy said, "Hot tongue!" Mom had difficult times during her childhood. Her dad died of the flu when she was about 3. Her mother built a little house without plumbing from the insurance

proceeds. (Her brother installed plumbing after taking industrial arts classes in school.) Mom came to Winona to attend Winona High and live with her Aunt Jesse and Uncle Tom, since there was no high school in Hugo. During the time my mother was living in Winona, Grandma was shot by a crazed man trying to court her. Perhaps raising a family in a home filled with interesting people was a good thing for my mother. It surely added to a sense of security for me. We never locked the doors. Why bother with a house filled with so many people?

Mom, however, never did get caught up in the Polish culture. She was so fiercely proud of her French-Canadian heritage. No Polish food, no Polish customs, no Polish language. Maybe my father was content to let them slip by. He was plenty busy working 50 hours a week at Peerless Chain and experimenting with one entrepreneurial venture after the next. He bought and sold cars for a profit. He made and sold potato chips, putting the chips in little bags. The little booth to sell the product lay in our garage for years.

Then came the chicken business. He would buy little chicks, raise them, slaughter them, and sell the product to local bars and restaurants. He built a huge insulated garage in the back yard – the chicken garage. Relatives were hired as necessary. Jerry, being the oldest and probably the most responsible, had to clean up the chicken dung. A whole team of relatives came over to butcher the chickens. And that was a gruesome business. This is what I remember popping into the garage one summer evening. One person slit the throats of the hapless chickens and threw them into a barrel to die. If any escaped, they would run briefly with their heads hanging down. The heads and feet would be chopped off, the bodies would be steamed to help get the feathers off. Then they would be gutted and the valuable parts saved. My Aunt Mary was disgusted by the smell so she had a handkerchief doused with perfume tied to her arm so that she could take a refreshing sniff now and then. On the other side of the back yard, we had another garage, aptly called the freezer garage, which housed refrigerators or freezers to store the meat.

Then came the sewing machine business. Many women still sewed and Dad thought he could sell them sewing machines. First, he sold them out of Lilla's barbershop and appliance store with little success. When the Cinderella Shoppe on Mankato Avenue became available, Dad rented it so that along with dresses and fabric, he could sell sewing machines. When the whole building went on sale, Dad bought it. Finally, he hit the jackpot when he bought a huge old automobile dealership building and converted it to the new Cinderella Shoppe. Mom was in it all the way, advising and working. And we all marveled at their dedication and determination. Their store was the place to come from the whole town and surrounding area for fabrics and notions. Sewing machines? Not so much.

My room on the second floor faced the street. Every night I would hear the train come down the street all the while ringing its bell. My mother couldn't sleep with the interruption. I remember she called the train company one day to ask if they could silence the bell. For me, it was the sound of the castle guard shouting "All is well." Ever since, I have enjoyed the sound in the distance of a train at night. We would put little pebbles on the tracks to see what myriad colors would result when they were pulverized by the train wheels. Some of the neighborhood kids would grab the ladders on the boxcars to hook a brief ride. I never got interested in that after seeing what the wheels could do to the pebbles.

Jerry's room was next to mine. Entry was verboten of course -- except when he was gone for overnight camping. I would steal into his bedroom and listen to the local radio station on his crystal radio using army-air force surplus equipment ear phones. One time I heard a transmission from an airplane flying overhead, "Crossing Winona bridge." I never picked up another transmission. Commercial air service at Max Conrad Airport ended long ago. Robert got Uncle Dan's bedroom when he left. Because of his asthma, he had a window air conditioner -- the only one in the house. Dad rigged up a big exhaust fan in the attic so hot summer nights were at least bearable. Robert's room was as tidy as Jerry's was messy. I don't know the derivation of Jerry's nickname, Slobbo, but his room gave a clue. Carol's bedroom was near the bathroom on the second floor. She tended to stay out of the way of the hustle and bustle of all the little men and big men in the house. She confessed to me many years later that she was pretty clever in sliding the guilt to her brothers for anything she broke or messed up. But her finesse sometimes crossed her up. Like the time the cat missed the litter box and crapped in her room. Instead of attacking the problem directly and cleaning the mess up, she opted to pour some drops of perfume on the offending material, which only made matters worse. On the other hand, Carol could always be counted on to make big batches of tasty cookies.

In the center of the first floor was a huge dining room joined to living room by an archway. Along one wall were the radio and the telephone. During my early years this was the sum total of the technology in the house. Only one phone and that with a party line to serve everyone in the house. The radio was our only source for piped in entertainment such as Big Jon and Sparky, The Lone Ranger, and Corliss Archer. Grandpa had a radio in the basement with an exterior antenna so he could pick up Chicago programming. The dining function of the dining room was sacrificed in favor of our first TV, which was placed so that everyone seated in the dining room and living room could watch our two channels -- Rochester and La Crosse. The space in the two rooms allowed Jerry's airplane to take flight but not so much to avoid clipping a branch of Mom's bonsai tree. Mom was not happy. She was happy, however, to take a noontime nap whenever possible covered with a newspaper on the living room couch. The magic voice of Cedric Adams reading the news put her under quickly.

The tiniest space in the house was the hallway closet underneath the interior stairway. Imagine one closet to hold all those winter coats. If you couldn't find yours, you could always gamble wearing somebody else's. This was the place that Dad kept his paddle. A friend of his at work had made a wooden paddle to save Dad's hands while administering any spankings. He was very proud of it. Unfortunately, just as quickly as Dad stored it there, it disappeared. I remember getting grilled by Dad if I knew anything about its disappearance, which I didn't. Fifty years later, Robert commented about how he saved our asses. He was the one who made off with it. Very smooth operation.

The basement was a world onto itself. It housed the coal bin, the fruit cellar, the workshop/office and the laundry. This was the very basement that my uncles were charged to sweep with wet sawdust many years previously. Uncle Dan was mystified as to how his brother finished sweeping so quickly. There was no fooling their father who knew the sweeping was not done. He simply checked to see if the floor was moist in various places. Once Uncle Dan got the secret from one of his brothers, he would simply sprinkle water on the floor in various places. For a three or four-year-old, it could be a scary place to come down alone to get some potatoes from the fruit cellar. One year, my Dad got the idea to spiff up the basement with a new coat of paint in order to hold a huge New Year's Eve party. But the uncles were a mischievous lot. Many of them with their cousins had formed the Dufus club and held their meetings in the summer kitchen of cousin Tony Palubicki's house only three houses from ours. To raise money for the club, they made some nice-looking wooden ash trays. Everyone smoked so everyone needed ashtrays. Anyway, the men were always ready for a gag. For that New Year's Eve party, they got hold of a dummy, dressed it and set it up in the corner of the bathroom so that the women would not see it until they were seated on the throne. All the men were in on the joke and they posted a notice on the door so the women would not spill the beans either. Aunt Audrey was the last hold-out. The party was winding down when she finally made her way to the bathroom. Everyone was waiting and Aunt Audrey did not disappoint with her loud shriek echoing through the house.