

Homes of My Great-Grandfather and Grandfather: Joseph Sieracki and Nicholas Sieracki

A great wave of Kashubian-Polish immigrants, including my great-grandfather Joseph Sieracki, arrived in Winona, Minnesota, in the 1870s. Their first houses went up close to the Mississippi River between Vine Street and Carimona Street. This was walking distance to their major employers – the flour mill, the Empire Lumber Company, the railroads – and their church, St. Stanislaus. They built little homes on half lots that later were affectionately called “shotgun” houses - long narrow houses with the living room, dining room and kitchen all in a row and with two living room windows facing the street. Lumber was cheap because the saw mills were booming. During this brief moment in time, Winona was the recipient of endless log rafts floated downriver from Minnesota and Wisconsin forests.



In 1885, my great-grandfather, Joseph Sieracki owned and was living in this house at 716 East Fifth St. - five blocks up from the river and two blocks away from the church. He worked at Youmans Brothers and Hudgins Lumber Co. Because of the two front windows and the long narrow frame, it is easy to understand how they acquired the nickname of “shotgun” houses. The house has served my family well through the years. Even into the 1950s it was owned by my cousins, descendants of my great-grandfather.

But I would like to share my perspective on my grandfather’s house, the house I grew up in at 507 East 2nd Street -- a big rambling two-story house with a living room, dining room and kitchen in row, but with a front parlor and three bedrooms alongside.



When I was growing up, my grandfather lived in one of the two rooms aside the kitchen, my great-uncle (my grandfather's brother-in-law) in the other. My uncle Louis and my uncle Dan each had a room upstairs until they moved out to get married. Since this is the multi-generational family situation I grew up with, I took it all for granted. My mother cooked huge meals and did lots of washing. We ate meals in the small kitchen in shifts. Everything ran smoothly because we learned early to be considerate. The house was never locked. I didn't even know my father had keys to the front door until he sold the house. One little hallway closet was crammed with the coats and boots. I look at my crowded hallway closet now and ask myself how a family of seven fit it all in. This is the closet where my dad put the paddle to discipline his four boys when they might get unruly. A co-worker had made it for him, and he was pleased to get it. Shortly thereafter my father was distraught because he couldn't find it. I had no clue as to its whereabouts. It never was found. The mystery was solved 50 years later when my older brother told me that he saved my ass by making it disappear.

The whole explanation of why so many family relatives lived in the house would come together over time like slowly finding pieces to a big jigsaw puzzle.

My dad, Ervin Sieracki, bought the house in the 1940s from his father, Nicholas Sieracki, and moved in with his family from the rented "shotgun" house next door. He needed room for his growing family. When my dad's brother, Uncle Dan, came back from World War II combat in the South Pacific, he thought there was no longer room for him in the big house he grew up in, so he stayed in a hotel in La Crosse. As soon as my father got the news, he drove to the hotel and told his brother, "You are coming home. This is your home." And when my dad's brother Lewis returned from service, he got the same message.

So I understood why Grandpa Nick and his two sons, my uncles, lived with us. It used to be their house. But how to explain the fact that Grandpa's brother-in-law was

also a boarder? Or how to explain what my mother told me years later: that Grandpa Nick's mother-in-law also used to live in the house.

What was going on here? Four generations in this house?

After my grandparents bought the house at 507 East 2nd St. in 1912, they added two rooms to it by moving a two-room "shotgun" house from down the block on Front Street and joining these two rooms to the house behind the kitchen. The two-room house that they moved was the home of my grandmother's family. So along with the two rooms, came my grandmother's mother, Marcyanna Breska Wojciechowski and her brother, Martin Wojciechowski, who were living in them. And they continued to live in these two rooms that were now behind the kitchen at 507 East 2nd. Even in death, the family is united. All are interred on the Nick Sieracki family plot at St. Mary's Cemetery in Winona.

The structure and history of the house make it a wonderful symbol of love and commitment to family. Surely it reveals part of the secret why our Kashubian-Polish ancestors thrived in Winona in spite of the fact that they arrived with little money and fewer possessions.