

Chapter 1. Early Memories and Some Experiences of Life on the Farm

As informed by my family, I was born in Knickerbocker Hospital in Manhattan, New York in December 1937. At about the age of one year my family moved to a small farm in western Pennsylvania. Among my earliest memories was the walk to and from the one room Truby school about a mile west of the farm. The farm itself was on the edge of an unincorporated village of Gastown with perhaps 150 residents in Armstrong County. The school was a one room building, common at the time in rural areas of America, with a potbelly coal and wood burning stove in the center. Eight grades of education shared this room with single teacher Effie Croil.

One of my earliest memories is Tuesday, May 8, 1945, VE Day, when we learned at school of the European War's end and were dismissed around noon to walk home. I would have been 7 years old and near the end of 2nd grade. I also claim with less certainty to remember VJ Day on August 15th of the same year. My recollection is that one of my pseudo uncles, John Roberts & family, were visiting from Euclid, Ohio and their fancy car having a radio was parked in front of the barn while Dad was inside milking cows on the Sunday afternoon of August 5. Both were trying to keep up with news from the car radio when word of Hiroshima came down. In Japan time the bomb was dropped Monday Aug. 6 at 8:15 am. It's uncertain when the news would have gotten to the farm in Pennsylvania.

My Father¹, born 1906, became an orphan at about 4 years when his Mother died. He was born in western Pennsylvania and lived with various surrogate families after his Mother passed. We believe his Father passed when he was about 20 years of age, and that my Father attended public country schools to only 6th or 8th grade. This explains the various pseudo relatives that I had around western Pennsylvania and Ohio, most remembered are the Roberts of Cleveland and the Harbaughs from the Salix, Pa. area. There were also a real uncle and two aunts living respectively in Vandergrift and around Johnstown, Pa.

Our Mother's² parents (Andreoski), John Anderson and Bridget Miskinis emigrated from Lithuania and she was born in Lawrence (Methuen?), Mass. in 1912 while perhaps one each older brother Justin and sister Ann were born in Lithuania and an additional sibling, Julie, born in the US. Little is known of how Mother got to NYC and met Father, but one version has the move happening at a young age of 15 – 16 years, perhaps to escape my Grand Father's alcoholism.

I had an older brother, Kenneth, and three younger sisters, Barbara, Jane and Jacqueline. Also a younger brother James who died at age 2 years of leukemia. This comprising a family of six siblings.

The farm was about 100 acres with maybe 40 – 50 tillable. One substantial hillside was suitable only for animal pasture and another steeper hill was wooded. Plumb Creek flowed through the south side separating the wooded hill from the tillable land. I think I learned that my Father purchased it from a bank foreclosure for about \$3,500, perhaps

¹ <https://ancestors.familysearch.org/en/KZ4F-X8N/kenneth-orlando-smay-1906-1991>: "When Kenneth Orlando Smay was born on 23 December 1906, in Salix, Adams Township, Cambria, Pennsylvania, United States, his father, John W. Smay, (author's grandfather) was 55 and his mother, Elizabeth Jane Fye, was 40. He lived in Adams Township, Cambria, Pennsylvania, United States in 1910. He died on 22 January 1991, in Ohio Pennsylvania on the farm, United States, at the age of 84, and was buried in Litchfield, Medina, Ohio, United States." Remarkable that the writer is only learning of this ancestry from an internet snippet at this late time 30 years after passing of both parents.

² <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/triblive-leader-times/obituary.aspx?n=josephine-dorothy-smay&pid=182355644>

somewhat on impulse while visiting my uncle and his brother in the Vandergrift area. Initially the farm was quite poor, though perhaps typical for the rolling hills area of similar farms. The tillable land was barely so in significant areas, having patches of near swamp, ridges of very rocky soil, and sometime fence rows between fields and neighbor farms wide and overgrown by brush and small trees. Gradually over 10 – 15 years this was improved gaining new arable land. Common tasks were picking and hauling stones, digging trenches laying 12” x 4” clay tile and covering to drain the wet areas and clearing and grading along the fences to inch out more crop space¹.



Figure 1. John (rear left) and siblings, circa 1980.

For many years the motive power for machinery on the farm was draft horses. On one occasion we had three horses pulling a grain binder. The binder was a large machine with a sickle bar, conveyor and bundle-tying mechanism that cut grain, wheat, oats, and tied it into sheaves. Something spooked the horses and a runaway followed smashing the horses and binder between a tree and a chicken coop doing great damage to everything but the tree. On another occasion a horse kicked Dad and broke his leg. After cutting and binding the sheaves of grain a major labor was in gathering and setting them into shocks to resist the weather until thrashing day. Everyone had work, some of my earliest at age 4 or 5 was carrying gallon jugs of drinking water to men working in the fields. A thrashing machine was owned as a business by someone in the area and in harvest season moved from farm to farm in some sequence to thrash grain of each crop. Six or eight farmers would form a cooperative sending one hand to the farm having thrashing day to assemble a working crew. Elaborate and very special meals were prepared and served by the hostess of the thrashing day farm.

Thrashing, like many tasks on the farm was really hard work. The thrashing machine was maneuvered into the upper story of the barn trapping huge amounts of dust and noise. Wheat, at 60 lb. per bushel poured out into a 20 lb. box every 30 – 60 seconds, each having to be carried to the granary maybe 50 ft. away, emptied to a bin and the box returned before the next filled up. Two men, sometimes myself, kept up with this through an 8 - 9 hour day with a 5 min. break between sheave wagon switching and longer for the ‘special meal.’ Probably the most difficult job was distributing the straw, while stumbling around on the mushy stuff,

¹ The *County Agricultural Extension* service would assist in planning drainage, recommend soil treatment, etc., and even subsidize the cost of this and similar improvements. However, it came with a ‘cost’ in regulation e.g., how many acres of wheat one might plant and such regulation. Eventually Dad became sufficiently annoyed by the restrictions that he refused all subsidies and perhaps tacitly ignored the restrictions.

in the barn's storage mow, all the while with a torrent of it blowing in on you in a blinding cloud of dust¹ from the thrashing machine. This was saved for winter bedding of livestock.

The crops were planted in an Agriculture Department recommended annual rotation of corn, oats, wheat, hay (cow hay). The hay preferably a clover, a legume, to restore nitrogen in the soil. Nearly everything grown on the farm was kept for consumption by the livestock, with maybe an occasional few bushel of wheat to sell. The family food sustenance came from a large vegetable garden and our own slaughtered poultry, pork and beef. In the early years cash income was provided by selling cream, eggs, sometimes vegetables and meat animals, chickens, hogs, and occasional cattle. Usually beef sold or consumed was a dairy cow that had passed prime – I never really learned what *steak* meant until I was older and gone from home, maybe in the Army. We did have excellent pork right after butchering time, which was always in the cold of winter to ease preservation of the meat until it could be salt brine cured, smoked or some canned. Closer to the next butchering time the meat was not so good due to the poor preservation available. Cream was obtained by centrifugal separation with a hand-cranked separator. In later years we switched from selling cream to selling whole milk from a larger herd, perhaps 8 to 12 cows. The milk picked up daily in 10 gallon cans by a neighborhood truck. On occasion when the milk truck operator was indisposed or on vacation Dad would operate it. We just put all the livestock permanently in the barn in winter. Every 6 weeks I would have to take a day off school to help Dad clean all the manure out. Truant Officers always made a big fuss and sometimes threatened a fine. Daily we moved down straw from the upper levels of the barn for clean bedding and hay for feed.

We always grew a good excess of sweet corn, much of which was sold to local markets freshly picked on the cob daily. Our sweet corn crop was well known and folks would come a significant distance, maybe 25 miles, to get their reserve order of our corn. This was a delicious treat of which we consumed a lot in the harvest month of August. Fifty or sixty years later this delicious treat, though perhaps still available in limited eastern rural areas, vanished from western and urban society when larger western farmers found they could get a higher price by putting it in auto fuel tanks – largely by lobbying large government subsidies.

In early times there was no refrigeration so in the summer months we depended heavily on canned and salted meat and lots of fresh vegetables. In winter the vegetables were mostly canned. I remember a summer a few years after the war our maternal grandparents and an uncle and aunt family visited the farm and grandmother bought a refrigerator as a gift. I have no recollection but assume we used an ice box and bought ice sometimes before this. The refrigerator was small with a freezer hardly bigger than to make ice cubes and keep a tub of ice cream, not suitable for any long term food storage.

The last blacksmith shop, owned by the Lance family, must have closed about 1936 or earlier. In summer, twice a day for milking, we always had to herd the cattle from barn to pasture past that blacksmith shop great excitement peering through the windows at all the treasures within, many blacksmith tools, the gasoline flame heated clothes iron I still have and a "good condition" Model T Ford truck. Then eventually my Father bought the shop and we got to bust in and explore all the treasure. He bought it for the sole purpose to tear down and use the lumber to build a modern farm machine shed, which worked out pretty well, the machine shed is the white building center left on Figure 3. However the most valuable gem, the Model T didn't fare so well. Eventually we got it running for a few days, then parked outside, it didn't even rate a place in the new machine shed, so over the years in the

¹ We had no OSHA to save us then and Louie Thomas seemed to always get this job.

Pennsylvania weather it just rusted away! Another treasure was a pristine set of brass sleigh bells, perhaps 20 – 30 bell on a good leather strap long enough to go round the host horse. Years later I tried to claim bells but they were nowhere, lost, stolen, sold?

I believe my parents electrified our house after moving in during late 1930s. Heat was supplied by two fire places and the coal cooking stove in the kitchen. The stove also had a large water tank beside the fire box for hot water source. Fresh water was delivered from a well with a hand pump over the sink. Since farm work exposes lots of dirt, before each of meal all the workers, Dad and kids washed hands and face in a basin at the sink before every meal. Baths were once a week maybe in a washtub on the kitchen floor while an out-house was used for obvious functions. In 1948 Mother made a bus trip vacation visit to New York City, visiting my uncle and her sister Ann followed by a visit to her parents in Massachusetts. My uncle Jarvis took me to all the interesting places in NYC, including top of the Empire State Building, up into the crown of the Statue of Liberty, the big museums around NYC. As Mother went on to Massachusetts by bus, uncle Jarvis accompanied and treated me to an airplane trip NYC to Boston. My first airplane ride was on a Douglas DC3.

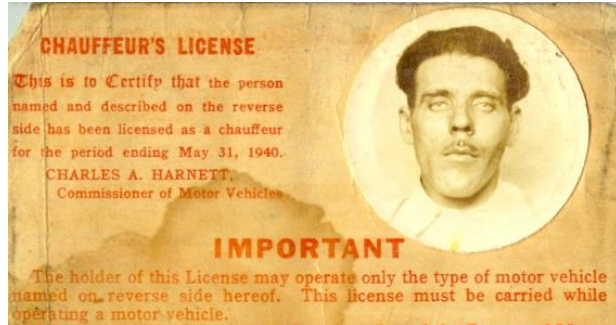
While summers were pleasant times with swimming visits in the creek, socializing with neighbors, great fresh vegetables and generally nice weather, winters were hard. One memorable neat event in summer was potato digging time. After digging with a horse-drawn machine the wilted dried plants were raked together in large piles and set fire at day's end. After burning down the most delicious baked potatoes ever were raked out of the ashes and eaten. In winter, rising early cold mornings to tend livestock, incessant vigilance against freezing pipes, and cleaning the barn where livestock was housed. A farm style bobsled was like a four wheeled wagon with two fixed runners on back and two steering runners in front. A vivid recollection I have is a freezing several mile trip on the bobsled to a neighbor to clean seed grain for spring planting. The seed grain was cleaned of chaff, weed seed and miscellaneous debris by putting through a hand-cranked windmill. In earlier times only sporadic farmers owned a windmill and rented or loaned its service to others. In preteen and early teen years I would have a trap line set in the creek and along the drainage tributaries leading to the creek. The main hope was to catch and sell pelts of muskrat, occasional raccoon, and hopefully the very valuable mink. I ran the trap line at 5 am in time to be back at the barn for milking close to 6 am and many times at night after milking.

Little is known to the family about my Father before the farm life and even less of Mother. I've heard at some time Dad was around and involved with high end automobiles and maybe lived for a time as a single man in the mid-west where these cars were made. This probably ties to the relationship to the surrogate Roberts family from Cleveland. Cars such as the Duesenberg, [Cord](#) and [Sterns-Knight](#) were often mentioned. In those times such expensive autos were driven from the factory to the purchasing owner and for a time we think Dad was employed doing this, delivering cars from the mid-west to New York City. I have seen a partial copy of his chauffeur's license (below) expiring May 31,



Figure 2 My Parents circa 1985

1940 with evidence it was issued in New York¹, but no sign of the issue date. Perhaps he needed this to deliver the cars. We have also heard that he was part owner of a high end auto service business in New York City, selling his share to help finance the new start on the farm. This is not totally consistent as we also know that for quite a few years he was making payments to the Elderton Bank on the farm, maybe finally paying it off around 1950. He seems to have had knowledge of people like Vanderbilts, Rockefellers and such that leads to believe that their chauffeurs brought their vehicles to his business for service. One version of why Dad moved to the farm is that the NY shop was failing due to the wartime economy making it too hard to get auto repair parts. Dad passed in 1991.



I know virtually nothing of Mother's early life or how she got to New York from Massachusetts. She passed in 2002.

Through most of my adult life I have praised my Father for teaching me much about life and entrusting me with great responsibility. We eventually graduated to farming with a tractor and disposed of the horses. By age 10 – 11 I was handling the tractor and other machinery as an adult. Not infrequently, Dad would send me to a field to work the tilling and preparation work and tell me to “come back when it was ready to plant,” entrusting me with this and many other similar ‘adult’ judgements. I always had some small flock of poultry, young dairy calf, hogs, as a project of my own. At age 14 or 15 before I could legally drive on the highway I drove the truck around the farm. Also at this age Mother and Dad and my sisters drove to Massachusetts on a 14 day vacation, leaving me alone on the farm to milk the then dairy herd twice daily and keep the place going. A neighbor “best friend” Blain and I had a great time running my own farm. What better preparation for adult life could one ask? More remarkable, after I was gone to an adult world, my sister Barbara, six years behind, saw a similar ‘life preparation’ on the farm. Approaching and through high school I participated in 4H and Future Farmers of America (FFA) sometimes in dairy cattle judging competition at county fairs and at the Harrisburg, Pa. Pennsylvania Farm Show. I was never very good at it and years later a TV show titled *American Idol* reminded me of the cattle judging. I just never took the stories very seriously.

For a time in the early 50s Dad got excited about the virtues of organic farming, no pesticides, weed killers, chemical fertilized, maybe husbanding earthworms in the basement etc. The only way to avoid chemical fertilizer was to purchase raw rock phosphate and ground potash by the railroad carload from far away – there was none down at the local feed and seed store where we usually got fertilizer. So he bought carloads, had to truck in large quantities from the freight station, then try to find like-minded farmers to sell the huge excess to. When applied to the soil this fertilizer is only slowly available to the plants, so one has to apply a large amount once every 4 or 5 years. The weeds grew, the bugs flourished, and the crop quality deteriorated and the whole exercise was an abysmal failure abandoned in a few years.

¹ License issued by Charles A. Harnett, Commissioner of Motor Vehicles, who shows up on the [internet](#) born 1888 and active in New York State Commissioner Motor Vehicles, therefore likely to be the person issuing the license.

Perhaps somewhat ahead of his time, but also sharing some characteristics of 21st century organic farming.

One evening, at age 16, now I had a driver's license Dad and I were milking, I yelled down to him several stations away, "Dad, what would you say if I bought a motorcycle?" He replied, "Oh you'll forget that in a day or so." I replied "Someone is bringing one over for me to look at later this evening!" Sure enough, next morning I was owner of my first vehicle, a Harley 74. After High School graduation in the spring of 1955 – I ranked 3 or 4 in my class of 52, don't remember exactly, two classmates went directly to college in the fall. Somehow college was not in my vocabulary and the money was not in my account. I must inject though, that Dad did say casually at one time that if I wanted to go somehow we would find a way. I negotiated a real job on the farm with Dad and joined the Indiana, Pa. Auxiliary Police motorcycle club. We had sharp official looking police uniforms and sometimes performed volunteer duties like traffic control or patrol duties at events like the county fair. Many cities within a 50 mile radius would have fireman's parades and such through the summer in conjunction with various events. Our club would have 6 or 8 members on bikes and uniforms riding honor guard at the head of many of these parades.

At the time the country was between the Korean War, ended 1953, and the Vietnam War to come, but subsequent to WW II there was a military draft. My older brother Ken had four years earlier volunteered in the Airforce as alternative to being drafted to Army infantry. Draft was for 2 years but enlistment was for 3 or 4 years in different services. As my turn came various military branches had a program where enlistees could choose a school that served like a trade school. Not seeing much future ahead in life, I chose in the fall of 1955 to enlist for 3 years in the US Army and attend a school as heavy equipment mechanic. This meant learning to perform major repairs and maintenance on trucks, bulldozers, power shovels, draglines, and such equipment. Probably much as I had been doing for several years on the farm, but the school would give some more formal training and some real credentials for employment in such work. Little did I know that 6 years later I would leave the Army with credentials that made me the boss in charge of final silo construction, installation and test of Titan ICBMs in ICBM silos around the western US.

Notably over my 16 years of youth on the farm there was rapid evolution in improvements of the land, transition from horses to tractor, cream production to dairy, hand pumped to readily available running water, fire place to central coal furnace heating in the house, a telephone with party line, and belatedly addition of a bathroom for bathing and toilet in the home. From fifth through eighth grade the one room schools had only one grade per building and high school was in a large multi-story building.

Despite his only 8th grade education, my Father was very smart and a voracious reader mostly reading farm trade magazines and current political publications and news media of the time. Generally he was conservative and quite patriotic. At some time after I left home he had his silo painted in three stripes, red white and blue (see Figure3). Also at the coming of the 1976 bicentennial, 30 years after I left the farm, he had one side of the barn painted with a huge flag and a 1776 icon of some sort. Figure 3 below shows an aerial view of the farm probably taken in the 80s. The house, barn, R-W-B silo and miscellaneous out buildings grouped center left are the farm while other buildings are nearby residences in Gastown. The field center right is some grain crop partially flattened by a summer storm. All the fields in the picture are a small part of the farm. The field just to the right of the



Figure 3. The Smay Farm in Gastown, Pa., circa 1975.

farm buildings with the irregular pattern is a grain crop that has been blown down in a hail or hard rain storm. This is a not uncommon occurrence destroying a part of the grain harvest.

Figure 4 below shows the farm house, note the propane gas tanks, this is mid 50s long after the coal stove described above and my first motorcycle in the foreground with sister Barbara. Also in Figure 4 a close-up of the barn. Note the 'hill' bordered by the stair step stone wall which provides large machinery access to the second level of the barn. The writer has no knowledge of when these structures were built but presumably well before 1938, maybe before World War I. So this hill, called the barn bridge was constructed totally by hand labor assisted by horses. Also, imagine driving the farm tractor with a large wagon load of grain or hay up the barn bridge into the barn. That's easy, but backing it out is another story. The tractor had steering wheels in front like any car while the wagon had front two wheels on a fifth-wheel mounting and at the hitch point, another single pin steering joint. So with three steering axes and eight wheels, this train must be maneuver backward down the hill without jackknifing or going over the side. Executing this with some precision was a source of some pride among the 11 – 16 year old farm boys of the time.

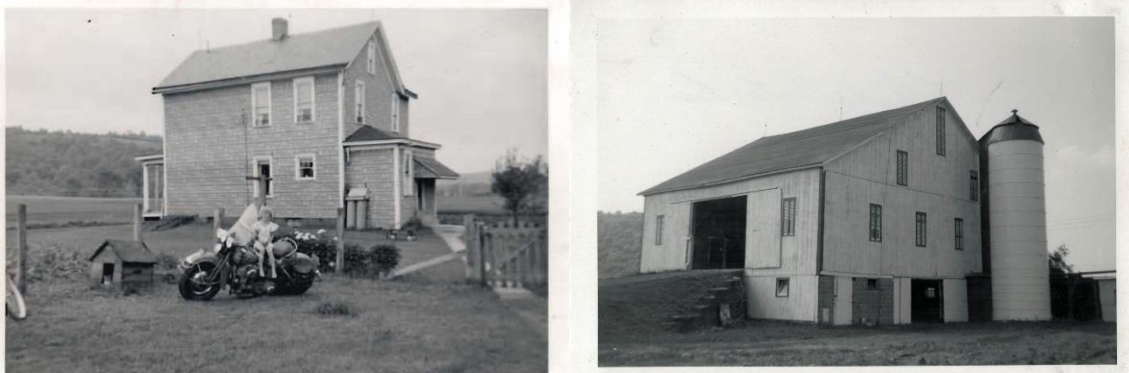


Figure 4 The Smay House, left, and Barn, right, in Gastown, circa 1955.

The photo of Figure 5 is my second Harley Davidson motorcycle with me in the Auxiliary Police uniform. The original, Figure 4 with sister Jane, had a spring suspension front wheel, while this one had a big upgrade in a hydraulic suspension branded by Harley as hydro-glide.



Figure 5.

Were we poor? I am not sure! We never wanted for food which was excellent quality vegetables in the summer garden harvest season and meat at winter butchering. In off-seasons both were pretty regular, meat sometimes worse. Children's toys were minimal. I recall very much wanting and getting a new scooter for Christmas, but now can't imagine why as there was no suitable surfaces to ride it on. The only bicycle I ever had was my brother's hand-me-down when he got a car at driving age. Some neighbor kids got new bicycles, others had none at all. One indicator is a dearth of any family photos prior to the mid 1950s when the Kodak Instamatic camera appeared. I am not aware that there was a camera in the family, or perhaps the means to pay for film and processing.