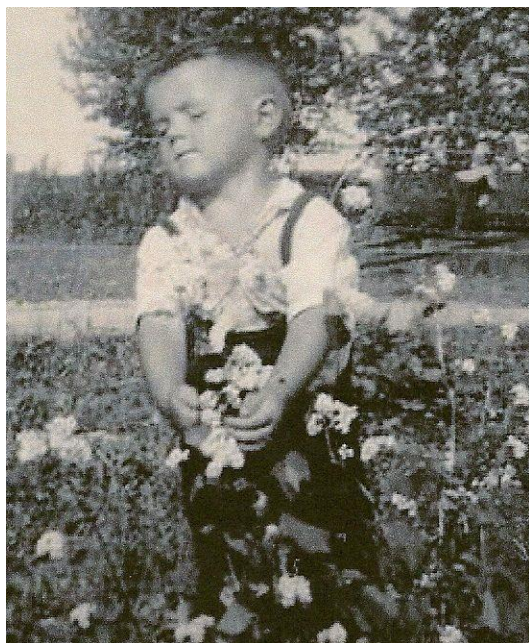


Living Off Grid? Been There, Done that - by Ernie Bies, April 10, 2020



Remember the “back to the land” craze of the late 1960s when hordes of hippies fled the comfort of their parents’ Toronto suburbia and moved to Killaloe, a quaint little town between the Ottawa Valley and Algonquin Park? They joined the American draft-dodgers who had already moved to old farms in the nearby Hills of Wilno. No electricity, no indoor facilities, no problem. Many of them made a go of it and are still there, home-schooling their grand-kids, living on the crafts they make and food the land produces. Sure, there might have been some

other cash crops to sustain their life style but they survived.

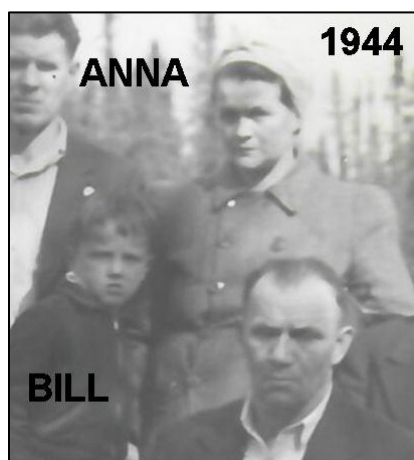
Travel back another 40 years to the 1930s when my parents immigrated to Canada and joined a different generation of back-to-the-landers, settling in a small farming community south of Hearst. Back to the land was not an end in itself but the beginning of a new life in a new land and the ultimate goal was to make it back to the city. For some it took decades of hard work and sacrifice and, while they may not have enjoyed long lives of leisurely retirement, they set the stage for their children to have better lives. What a difference there is between the expectations of the immigrants of those days and those of today. My father first came to Canada from Czechoslovakia in 1927 then went back home and took a bride, Anna Huckova, in 1932. He returned to Canada and bought a 75-acre farm in the new Slovak community being formed eight miles south of Hearst. My mother joined him in 1933 with Olga, their new baby girl. His brother, Michal, settled on the adjacent farm.

The following is a brief history and a snapshot of life on the farm through my eyes. While I did borrow some of the stories from my older brothers and sisters, most of these memories are as I remembered them and may differ from theirs.

After years spent wrestling control of the land from the black spruce, the settlers survived on subsistence farming and whatever paying jobs they could find. Original clearing was done with an axe and a bucksaw with men and women doing their share of the labour. Houses, barns and outbuildings were built to accommodate growing families and livestock - horses, cows, pigs and chickens. A school was built on Uncle Mike's property in 1933 and my father added a self-contained unit to his house for the first teacher, Stella Drajanoff. The Slovak community gained a post office and was officially named Bradlo in 1936.

Dobie, Ontario: In the late 1930s, my father decided to move to Dobie Ontario to try his luck, now with Annie, John and Rudy added to the family. He built a large building with plans to run a rooming house and restaurant. Leaving Bradlo in his rear view mirror, he sold his house to the school board to serve as a teacherage. Things didn't pan out in Dobie so he returned to Bradlo in 1941, taking shelter in Uncle Mike's cabin, where Bill was born. He continued working on the farm for a few years, building a new house and adding another girl, Martha, to the family.

Geraldton, Ontario: The gold mines of Geraldton beckoned and he worked underground as a driller's helper before



being severely injured in a accident on October 2, of 1944. The driller, Alex Heino, died in the accident and my mother, six months

pregnant, attended his funeral with Bill. I was the last to join the family, three months later, while Dad recuperated in the hospital. Times were tough and baby pictures were not a priority but my sister Martha managed

to find a picture of my sister Annie holding me in a family album on a trip to



Czechoslovakia. My sister Olga told me that her teacher gave her a Jersey Milk chocolate bar when I was born but she did not share it with me then. Years later she did give me my own Jersey Milk bar and shared that story.

My memories of Geraldton come from my baby book courtesy of Nugent's Drug Store.

I was delivered by Dr. MacBurney and

weighed in at 9 lbs, 10 oz. About 10 years

ago, I met Nancy Nugent at an Ottawa

Senators hockey game through a mutual

friend. Her brother Dale has season tickets

in the same section as mine. What are the chances that three babies born in the

Little Longlac Hospital would reconnect 75

years later?

Dad was unwilling to resume work

underground, and once again, he loaded the

family and possessions onto a truck and

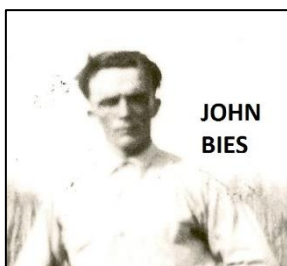
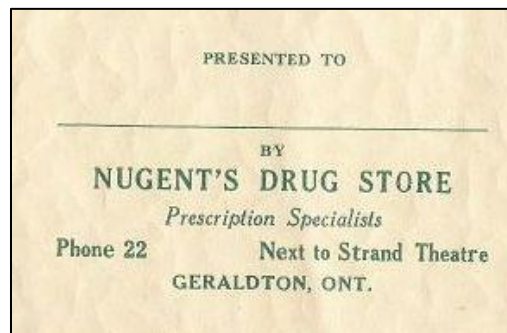
returned to the farm in Bradlo. I was too

young to remember the parting but I imagine

it was like the Joad Family heading west in

Steinbeck's *"The Grapes of Wrath."* I'm told I

got to ride in the cab of the truck .

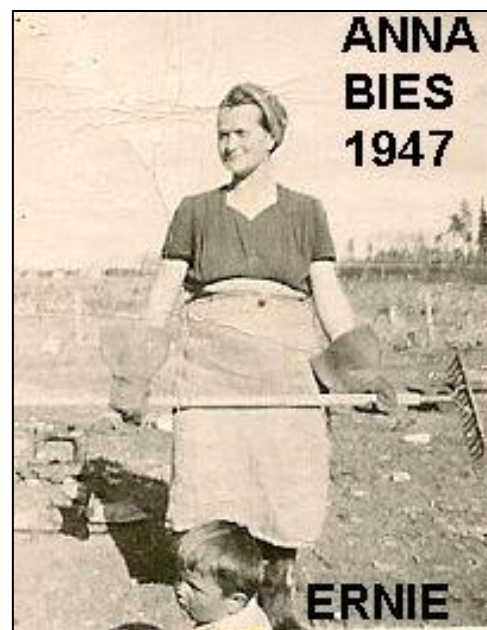




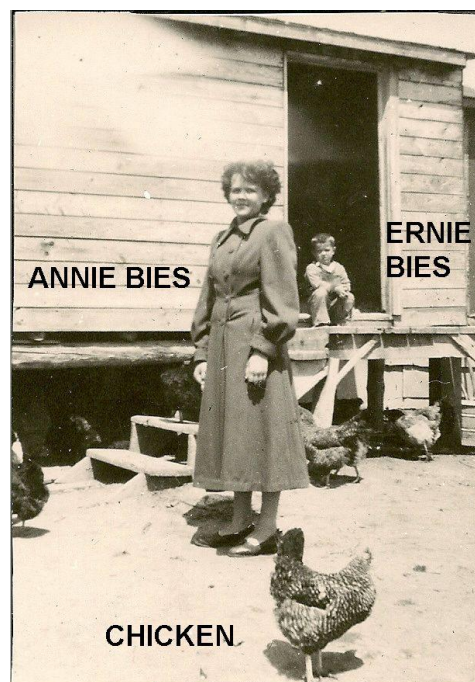
Every winter many of the men from the community, sought employment as teamsters or “bush whackers” in the northern bush-camps. At first snow they hitched up their horses and left their families to fend for themselves. They came home for a short Christmas visit and then were off again to the camps until spring. Like the other farm wives, my mother was left to tend to her children, manage the few head of livestock and chickens and survive the harsh

winters of Northern Ontario. With the horses gone, she was without any means of transportation. Before he left, Dad stocked up the pantry with provisions from town.

Bags of flour and sugar and pails of lard and plum jam were hauled in. Since the



empty flour bags became clothing, aprons, table cloths and pillow cases, they all had to be different. Empty lard pails were put to good use for storage in the shed, feeding the chickens or catching drops from a leaky ceiling. Nothing went to waste. In addition to supplying eggs daily, the chickens were also guests of honour at Sunday dinner and provided endless chicken soup that cured all ailments. The dugout under the house served as our root cellar and was stocked with potatoes, carrots and turnips from the summer's harvest. Mom was a master at stretching her provisions to always ensure we were fed. I was surprised later to discover that hamburger and rice pudding were not normally made with bread filler. My father did not do well on kitchen duty. I remember one time my Mom was hospitalized for a week and my Dad had to cook. He found the biggest pot in the house and made a week's supply of pork and beans. Supplemented with a couple of rolls of baloney and bread, we had all the basic food groups covered. We also learned about social distancing on the school bus. Most kids today have never enjoyed the delicacy of fried baloney.



There really was no need to go to town on a frequent basis as the older children went to the one-room schoolhouse down the road. Doctors from town would visit the isolated farm families in their horse-drawn cutter on routine or emergency calls. Even the animals got home visits as the Watkins salesman would appear on schedule to replenish the tins of salve and bottles of ointment that my father needed to treat the harness sores and aching muscles of the horses.



Gedeon Vermette provided a similar service with Rawleigh Products. Farmers usually had to take care of their own veterinary and calving issues.

Mother was a natural gardener from the start. With the livestock producing unlimited fertilizer, and her tender care, we were never without vegetables. She even planted a beautiful flower garden that proved to be as hardy as she was. About ten years ago my wife and I were at the now abandoned farm and she saw a lone pink rose gamely trying to grow through the matted vegetation. We didn't have a shovel and, on the way back to town, she lamented not being able to salvage this poor, lonely rose. Finally, I pulled into someone's yard and said, "Do you have a shovel? My wife is driving me crazy." Without pause he produced a shovel and we went back to get the rose. We planted it at our cottage at Golden Lake and it liked the southern climate so much that, by the next year, it had taken over the whole flower bed. I gave shoots to my brother Bill and sister Olga and they said they had the same result.

HYDRO NONE: Truly off the grid, we did our homework by the light of coal oil lamps.



FETCHING WATER: In winter, the outdoor well often froze in the night and had to be thawed and primed with hot water in the morning. My oldest sister, Olga, recalls one winter, before my time, when our well went dry. Mom had to take a copper boiler on a sled next door to Uncle Mike's farm, to fetch water every day. Mom pulled and Olga gamely pushed the sled as water splashed into her boots. By the time they got home her feet were soaked and freezing. This required several trips as the livestock consumed more water than the family. Later my dad dug a new well by hand, with the older boys pulling the dirt out with pails on ropes. He lined the well with cinder blocks. One year my father hired a bulldozer to clear more of his land for planting. He envisioned growing wheat and oats but the season was too short so they became extra hay fields. He did take advantage of the bulldozer to dig a small pond on Uncle Mike's farm, to provide water for the livestock. In winter we had a mini skating rink, but did have to chop a hole to get water for the cows and horses who did not seem to

mind the ice-cold water. In the summer we tried to swim in it but it was just a mud-hole and we had to compete with the cows for swimming time.

THE FACILITIES: We had the benefit of two gender-neutral outhouses, our own and the one next door at the teacherage. No need for reading material in those days, as time spent was minimized when the temperature dropped to 40 below and the icy cold winds blew up to greet you, or when your older brother was banging on the door.

WOOD HEATING: No electrical service meant the small farmhouse had to be heated with a woodstove in the kitchen and a box stove in the living room. These were connected to the chimney by a plain stove pipe suspended from the ceiling. We would sit around the box stove that was so hot our faces could be sweating and our backs chilled. We'd get as warm as possible and then dash to bed under huge homemade comforters that were stuffed with chicken feathers. The stovepipes were always cleaned in the summer but a winter's diet of the local soft wood caused a significant buildup of soot and, with it, the constant danger of a chimney fire. On some cold nights the stove pipes became so hot they glowed red. My mother and older brothers and sisters frantically soaked towels and potato bags in cold water and threw them over the red-hot pipes until they cooled and the danger passed. Ever vigilant, Mom rarely had a full night's sleep.

Today, we have a three-season cottage and often go out for a few days in the winter. The plumbing is drained so we have to use outdoor facilities. Coupled with having to bring our own water and hauling wood from the woodpile for heat, it seems like we are reliving my early days on the farm but at least it is by choice, not of necessity.

MOTHER'S BEAR ENCOUNTER: One night my mother was going to the barn when she came face to face with a black bear who was investigating the chicken coop. She let out a shriek and the bear stood on his hind legs, probably more afraid than she was. She yelled "Jan, Jan" and my Dad, coming out to investigate the commotion, found a stand-off, with both the bear and my mother standing frozen and staring at each other. Dad ran for his 303 rifle and returned to the yard to find

that the bear had run off behind the house into the potato field. There was enough light from the moon for my Dad to get a good shot and end this bear's marauding days. The next day he skinned it and hung the carcass in the chicken coop. The chickens, who had been bear food the day before, proceeded to pick the carcass clean. Surprisingly enough they produced some very tasty eggs for the next few weeks.



Dad loved to regale people with this story and each time he would tell it he would embellish the parts that got the biggest laughs till finally, as he told it, he was standing there, gun in hand with the bear and Mom bellowing at each other and he didn't know which one to shoot. Untanned, the bearskin did not survive the summer heat.

THE GREAT FRUIT TRUCK INCIDENT: Isolation on a small farm in the 1940s in Northern Ontario can lead to fantasies in the mind of a four-year old boy resulting in desperate measures. The cold winters shut us in for long dark months. The older ones escaped to the one room school down the road for the day, coming home to chores and homework by the light of coal oil lamps.

Spring brought some respite from our shut-in status but muddy roads and fields limited our excursions. Summer, that brief interlude between last winter and next winter, finally brought total freedom. Raspberries, strawberries, black and blue berries, and even hazel nuts were in abundance and my mother would take us on picking patrols. We probably ate more than we picked but she was a purposeful picker and we always had home-made jams to supplement the pails of plum jam she bought from West and Company. Picking on abandoned homesteads brought stern warnings to avoid the open wells and to watch for hungry bears who also wanted these berries. We never did see a bear on these trips and I think the warnings were just to keep us within her sight. I was told that the closest encounter to wildlife we had was when my brother ate a frog on a dare and, on

another occasion, stepped in a hole where a mother garter snake was raising her writhing brood.

These berry picking trips made us look forward to the arrival of the Fruit Truck from Southern Ontario. I had no idea where it had come from or where it went later but the high-light of the year was to see this huge truck come rumbling down the dusty road. He stopped at each farm to sell bushel baskets of fresh apples, peaches, pears and tomatoes. While we could grow peas, beans and root vegetables, the short season did not favour



above ground veggies. We were amazed to see this huge truck packed floor to ceiling with bushels and bushels of fresh produce. My father could only afford a limited supply but he made sure we had apples, peaches and pears. With no electricity on the farm we could not keep these special treats for long periods, or so we told ourselves, till our aching tummies made us slow down. I watched the fruit truck drive off and wished I could go with it. What could be better than driving a fruit truck?

Mom made pies and canned a supply of fruit for the winter pantry. The reaction to the arrival of the fruit, with the happiness and joyful activity it created, did not go unnoticed to these four-year-old eyes. The next week Mom was preparing to go to town to buy her regular groceries when she discovered that her grocery money was missing. She was in a panic as money was extremely limited and even accused the truck driver of robbing her as he was the only stranger to have come through recently. Lamenting near the top of her Slovak "*Oy Yoy Boje Moi*" scale no-one knew how to console her until my sister Olga noticed that I wasn't present at this group grief encounter. She found me hiding under the porch and putting two and two together, she asked what I knew about the money. I burst into tears and admitted that I had taken it. When asked why, I blubbered, "*I wanted to buy a Fruit Truck*".

THE LADIES: We always had a pair of dairy cows that went by names like Bossy, Bessie or Elsie. One of the last ones we had was named Colette after a new



neighbour that my mother was not too fond of. These girls provided the milk for our daily consumption and butter which the younger ones spent countless hours churning. Sour milk was converted to cottage cheese, some of which was sold. The cows even provided their replacements, though I wasn't aware of the process. When the time was right, my mother tied a rope around the neck of one of the cows and they would set off on foot down the road. That evening they would return, both looking exhausted, but Bossy with a big smile on her face. The nearest bull was several miles away, so it was quite a long hike for both of them. Nine and a half months later we'd be blessed with a new calf, hopefully female. Veterinarians were only called in drastic situations and the farmers had to take care of the birthing themselves. When the calf was mature and producing milk, poor Bossy made the ultimate sacrifice to provide meat for the winter. Some meat was taken to the merchants in town to help pay the bills.

We always had a hefty tab at West and Co. My mother would phone in an order for the items she could not produce on the farm. No need for milk, eggs, butter, chicken or vegetables but she needed bags of flour, sugar, coffee and hardware items. One day she asked for the English name, for an insect bomb, and, not realizing I was pranking her, she very seriously ordered "*one H-Bomb.*" I wonder what the grocery clerk thought knowing those foreigners were now under Communist rule back in the old country. I'm surprised we didn't get a visit from the RCMP.

Because the younger children treated the cows and calves as pets, we were not allowed in the yard during the butchering process. We had to stay in the attic and amuse ourselves until it was over. One of my duties was to go and fetch the cows from the fields at night and put them in their stalls. It seemed like miles walking through grass almost as tall as I was but when I saw the farm as an adult it was only a few hundred feet.



HEAVY HORSES: From the 1930s, my father always had a pair of work horses with names like Tom, Prince, and Mike until he finally bought a Case Tractor in the mid-fifties. Horses were major contributors to any farmer's success. They hauled the logs, pulled the stumps and the stone boats when clearing the fields for ploughing. When their



domestic chores were done, they were called on to haul pulp to the railway sidings or work in the bush camps. In addition to this heavy work they were pets and companions for the farm children. These massive animals were extremely patient with little children who wanted to be cowboys. Their stalls in our barn offered very

cramped quarters as they stood side by side, with less than a foot of space between them and the walls. They stood under a low ceiling with the hayloft above and their heads extending into the internal walkway that housed their troughs, where we fed and watered them. The clearance above their shoulders was only a couple of feet but that did not deter my sister and I from playing cowboy. We would give them some oats in a pail and when they lowered their heads to eat, we would clamber up their necks, pulling ourselves up by the hair on their manes until we could sit on their backs. We could not sit upright and had to lean forward, but now we were cowboys, riding these magnificent beasts. Fortunately, these gentle animals tolerated our games until my father found us and laid down the law ending our pseudo-riding days. He said if the horses got startled and bucked, or if we fell off under their hooves we'd be crushed instantly. He remembered his next-door neighbour, Joe Ziga, having been fatally kicked by his horse on the road in front of our place years ago. In the past, however, he and his friend Gordon Boracheff did ride the horses.

CHORES: The older boys were tasked with cutting and splitting the firewood and keeping the stove going. As I got older it became my job to stock the wood box every day. One night, at about two a.m., the fire went out and the wood box was empty. My father got me out of bed and sent me for wood. Lesson learned, as it only happened once. I went off into the dark wood shed with a lantern imagining wild animals lurking just out of the reach of my light. The wood shed was only a stone's throw from the house but to my short legs it seemed like a mile. Trembling with fear and cold I was reassured to see Dad peeking out from behind the curtain making sure I was all right.



Haying was another all hands-on-deck activity, with everyone having an assigned task. Martha and I were the official hay stompers on top of the wagon and in the hayloft. Everyone helped in tending the crops and gardens. Working in the

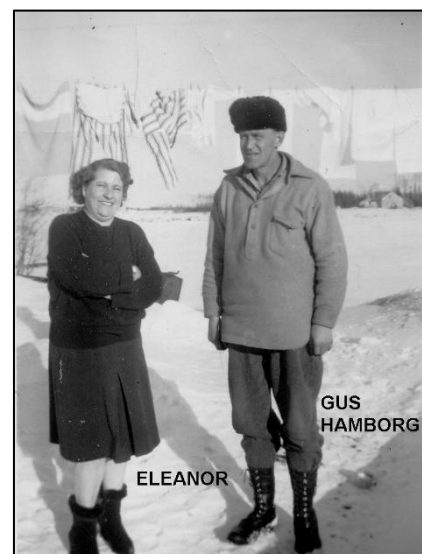
fields we got to eat fresh carrots and potatoes right out of the ground. We

probably ingested a few bugs and micro-organisms that allowed us to develop super immune systems and we were generally very healthy.

The livestock and chickens had to be fed and watered daily and the fresh fertilizer they produced hauled to the manure pile. The messiest job, by far, was cleaning the chicken coop. My brother Bill pulled rank and got to clean the sloped roost with a snow shovel. Martha and I had to clean out the feeding area below. One day, Bill lost his grip on the snow shovel and I caught it on the top of my head, leaving a permanent centre part in my hair. My mother calmly cleaned it up and bandaged it. In those pre-Medicare days doctors were not called unless we were severely ill or injured. I have three or four unstitched scars as mementos of growing up on the farm.

NEIGHBOURS: During the 1940s, the Slovak settlers began to leave Bradlo, seeking more hospitable climates down south. I

vaguely remember the Bunksos and the Sevc's travelled on the same school bus before they too moved to Toronto in the 1953. Families of diverse ethnic backgrounds moved in. Mike Hamulak moved into the Bunsko's home. The Garneau's moved into the Parosh homestead across the road from us. Gus and Eleanor Hamborg moved in next door to us onto Joe Ziga's original farm. The Hamborg's became great friends of my parents, and Gus served as secretary of the school board from 1947 to 1952. He is responsible for turning my sister Olga into a



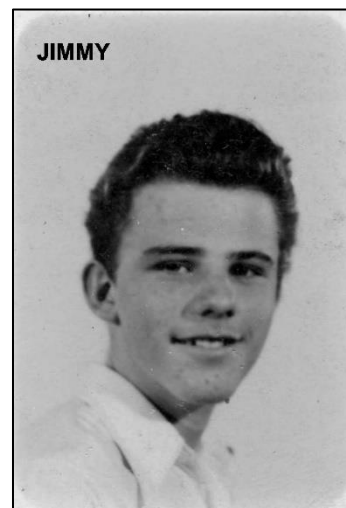
Toronto Maple Leaf fan as they listened to Foster Hewitt's Hockey Night in Canada broadcasts on the radio every Saturday night. He schooled her on the rules of the game and introduced her to the players. She remains an avid fan and actually attended her first Leaf game earlier this year, 70 plus years later. Gus was a scaler with Driftwood Lumber which had a camp a few miles south of Bradlo. When I was touring M.J. Labelle's museum in Cochrane recently, I was surprised to see Gus's camera on display. Apparently he spent many years as the accountant for Labelle Construction.

James and Elizabeth (Betty) Sloan moved into the Hamborg house in the early 1950s. Their children, Eddie, Peter, Tommy, Betty and Neil were roughly the same ages as our family so instant friendships were made. Eddie and Peter became good friends with my older brothers and they shared many farm adventures, hunting, trapping and building twig houses in the forest. Sadly, the Sloans left about 3 years later to live in Selin's Lumber Camp where James was a mechanic. They then moved to Elliot Lake in 1956 where James was killed in a tragic mine accident two years later.

After the Sloans, the next residents of the farm next door were the Franson family. Eric and Dagny along with Annie, Willie and Jimmy. Mrs. Franson became good friends of my mother and they shared bread recipes to everyone's advantage. Mrs. Franson's Norwegian sweet bread recipe combined with my mother's poppy seed rolls to make the tastiest dessert imaginable. Mrs. Franson always had a cigarette lit up and she was an avid reader – of comic books. She went to town every week and

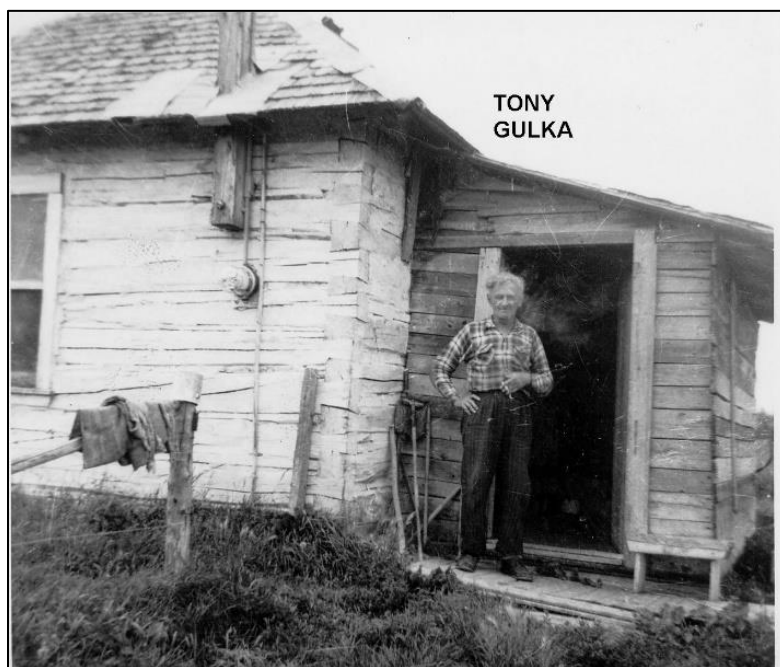


bought every new comic as soon as it was released. She read them once and then passed them on to me, giving me the start of a tremendous collection. I documented all these precious books and, by the time I left home at the end of high school, I had accumulated a couple of thousand comics, including the entire set of Classics Illustrated. Sadly, when I went away to grade 13 in 1962, my father gave them all away to my niece. We had a well-trodden path to the Franson house as they had many attractions, including a table hockey game, that resulted in many late night visits. The Franson's had a good friend named Sigfried Nelson with a pick-up truck who often visited them in Bradlo. Jimmy once gave us a ride



in the back of that pick-up and ditched it. Luckily, no one was hurt. The Fransens moved closer to town later, near to the Bosnick's, who became recipients of her comic book largesse. Sigfried was killed on highway 11, east of Hearst, when he was walking home after a night of celebrating in a town bar. Later the Fransons moved down to Lambton in Southern Ontario.

By the mid-fifties only the Bies and Bernier families had school age kids in the Bradlo settlement. The only other residents were batchelors living alone in the



abandoned log cabins. Our neighbor to the west was Tony Gulka, a Ukranian character who could have played the Walter Brennan roles in the movies. Further west was Mat Marcinak, one of the early settlers who had left his family in



Czechoslovakia. He had been an active participant in the early days, even playing Santa Claus at the School Christmas parties. With no means of transport, they relied on Nick and Alex Bubnick's taxi service for provisons from town. To the east our neighbours were Karl Dedina, a churlish man who the kids were afraid of for no partcular reason and Nadvornik and Novak. Rumour had it

that one of them was a member of the famous Czechoslovak Legion. We would visit them, delivering eggs, baking and cottage cheese that my mother sold. They would give us apples, hard candy and occasionally a George V nickel.

ENTERTAINMENT: In the 1940s there were many families with similar aged children so there were many activities centred at the school. In my time we were

the only family left so we had to create our own leisure activities. We'd explore the abandoned buildings and the woods, pick berries and hazelnuts, swim at the gravel pit and ride our bikes. At home we had board games, like Sorry, Snakes and Ladders and Monopoly and did family jig-saw puzzles.

The Winnipeg Free Press would come in the mail and, although it was several weeks out of date, the columns of print were devoured by the adults before being relegated to other duties like cleaning lamp chimneys, lighting the stove or stocking the outhouse. The stories were meaningless to my pre-school eyes but the pictures of the outside world, big city scenes and glimpses of other countries captured my attention.

In these pre-television days, our main connection to the world beyond the farm was the radio. Limited by battery life, there was continued competition for control of the dial, much like today's control of the remote. My parents wanted *news*, *Jack Benny* or *Art Linkletter and his People Are Funny*. The girls wanted music and *Our Miss Brooks*. Not surprisingly all three of them became teachers.

The boys wanted *Hockey Night in Canada* and adventure with *Boston Blackie*, *Gang Busters* and *Johnny Dollar* among their favorites. We'd sit in the dark and scare ourselves silly listening to *Suspense*, *Inner Sanctum*, *The Shadow* and *The Whistler*. Later, it was quite an eye-opener to see photos of the cast, all dressed in suits and fancy dresses, standing in front of microphones reading scripts and performing these radio shows live.

Even more surprising was to learn that Matt Dillon on *Gunsmoke* was played by a chubby 5' 5" William Conrad. I recently discovered the old-time radio channel on Sirius and listen to it whenever I am in the car.



Saturdays were special as Dad would take us into town for a movie matinee at the Royal Theatre. Tarzan was always a sellout and Lad Medve would put planks on

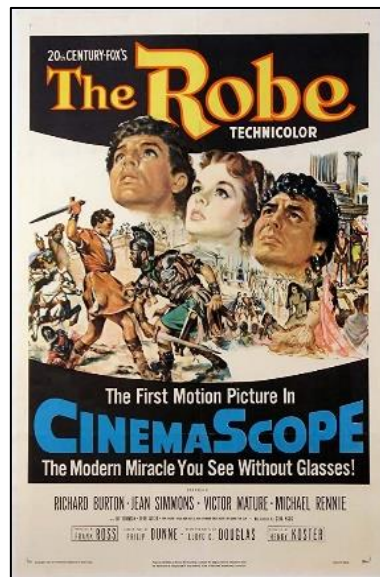


pop cases at the front of the theatre for extra seating that I am sure did not meet fire code.

Those close-up seats did not give a great perspective to the movie but we didn't care because we were

almost in the action. We couldn't wait for the next instalment of serials like *Captain Video - Master of the Stratosphere*. Twenty-five cents for a movie

and a nickel each for a Pepsi and a bag of chips and we had memories to discuss until the next visit. The movie I remember most vividly was "The Robe", a biblical feature that introduced Cinemascope to the movies. I was hooked forever and still love those old-time movies to this day.



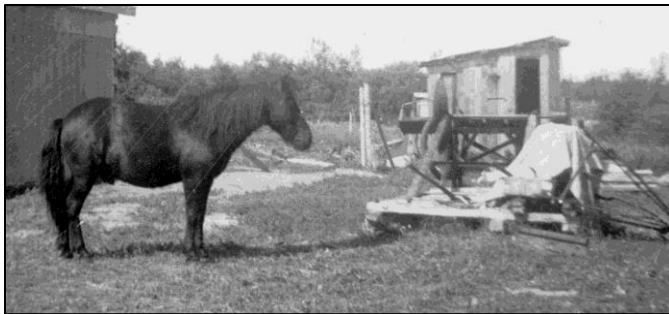
Occasionally we'd go to a Saturday evening movie that started at 7 p.m. There was a nine o'clock curfew in town and Bill, Martha and I would have to sneak over to where my Dad had parked the pick-up truck and hide inside while our he completed his socializing at the Palace Hotel. We would freeze whenever a car or pedestrian went by. We were doubly frightened when the police car went by frequently, convinced they were onto us and waiting for us to venture onto the street. I realized later that he had parked strategically on Prince Street, just around the corner from the Palace and down the street from the Police Station.

MODERNIZATION: The 1950s brought major changes as Dad secured his first permanent job on the road crew of the Department of Highways in Hearst. He was overjoyed to be making \$1,950 a year but this limited his time at farming so



he decided to modernize. The last pair of horses was sold and a new Case Tractor appeared on the scene.

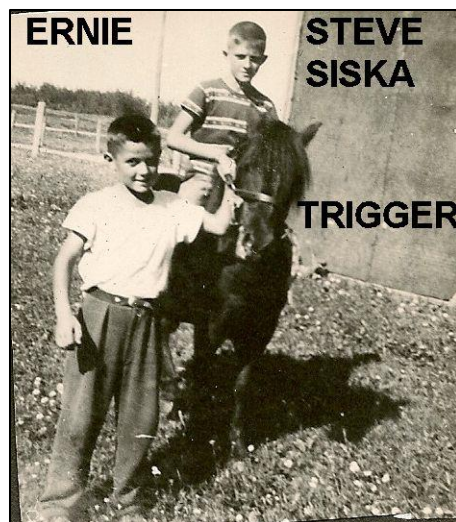
Knowing that the children would be heart-broken at losing our faithful plough horses and sometime steeds, Dad softened the blow by buying us a Shetland pony. He also acquired an International Harvester truck to haul his pulp wood to the sidings at Stavert or Wyborn. On cold winter mornings, with no electricity and no block heater,



he would put a washtub full of hot coals under the engine block to warm the oil. I still have the scar under my left eye from the back-left corner of that truck when I didn't duck fast enough to clear it when playing hide and go seek.

Dad modified the horse-drawn farm implements by cutting down the tongues and rigging a hitch for the tractor. With the horses, he could do most of the field work himself; ploughing, disking, harrowing, mowing, raking hay, manure spreading, and cultivating. Some of these chores he could still do by himself, but mowing and raking hay and cultivating potatoes now required a driver and an operator. Dad tried, without success, to teach Mom how to drive the tractor. We were his next trainees and soon all of us could drive the tractor or operate the hay rake. Once a year Dad would borrow the township pull-grader and I would drive the tractor as he graded the road to fulfill statutory labour obligations in lieu of taxes.

TRIGGER: Demonstrating our lack of imagination, we called our new pony Trigger. Lacking a saddle, Trigger had limited patience with strange little kids riding on his back, hanging on to his mane. When he decided he'd had enough, he'd buck once and we'd be in the dirt. If we persisted, he'd give us a little bite to discourage us. Brother Bill and Trigger developed a serious animosity as Bill liked to ride him backwards, holding on to his tail. That ended when Trigger did his full bucking bronco stretch, throwing Bill into the air and lashing out with his back legs to catch Bill with a hoof in the head, splitting his ear open. We didn't report the full details of that accident to Dad, fearful that he would take it out on the poor pony, but from that day on Bill treated Trigger with much more respect. The cagy old Pony had another quick dismount technique. We tended to ride him in the yard between the house and the barn. There was a fence along the back of the barnyard with an opening for a gate near the barn. One single strand of barb wire ran from the top of the fence post to the barn and was adequate to keep the cows in the back field. Trigger knew that if he lowered his head he could slip under that strand of wire without a scratch. Sometimes he'd simply make a bee-line for that gate, scoot under it and leave us spinning like propellers in his dust. The resulting scratches to our stomachs and legs didn't deter us from riding another day. Trigger seemed to instinctively know how to deal with adversity. One winter my father was clipping his hoof and cut into the quick, making it bleed. Trigger calmly walked over to the snow bank and stuck his foot in it until the bleeding stopped. We were sad to see old Trigger ride off to a new home when we made the move into town a few years later.



THE GRID COMES TO THE FARM: In the mid 1950s we lost our claim to living off grid when Hydro came to our concession. Eero Maki wired the farmhouse and my sister Olga, who was teaching in Hearst that winter, sent a fridge from town. The concession road was not ploughed and we had to drag the fridge the last mile and

a half on a sleigh. That McLary Easy was still going strong almost forty years later when we sold the house in town.

With a new fridge, the first thing we kids insisted on making was Jell-O. After



many failed experiments trying to make it out on the porch only to get a frozen mass of ice crystals, we finally had a fridge

and could enjoy real Jell-O, just like the town kids. To this day red Jell-O is still my favorite dessert.



CHURCH: In the late 1940s, my father would drive us to the Zion United Church in Stavert. Visiting student ministers would provide services as part of their training. The Fleshers, Dahlines and the Killicks were regular churchgoers there and I can still hear their stirring renditions of the hymns.

I was usually called on to carry the collection plate. I would stand before the Minister with the offering, while he gave thanks. Never had I seen so much money: silver dollars, half dollars and some paper money too. When I think of it now, there was probably only about \$20 on the plate and it had to serve the Minister for a week.

The photo below depicts one of these Sunday services, attended by the Bies and



Dahlin families, as well as Ruby Walper and Nora Taylor, nurses at the hospital in Hearst. They frequently accompanied the student Minister, Rev. Howard Pentland to the church in Stavert where Ruby played the piano.

Zion United Church in Stavert -1950

Back: Nellie Dahlin, Nora Taylor, Rev. Howie Pentland, Erik Dahlin, Anna Bies, Ruby Walper (Loucks)

Front: Liz Dahlin, Ingrid Dahlin, Bill Bies, Ernie Bies, Martha Bies

The Ministers in Hearst were responsible for several outlying communities holding services in any available facility. They would often have to rely on townspeople to drive them to the remote services, or they would cycle or walk. The Zion United Church was built in 1942 when Rev. G.G.D. Kilpatrick, along with Rev. G. Watt Smith, undertook to raise the money and the volunteer labour required to fill the need for a new church to serve that area.

We could not attend the summer camps that the town kids enjoyed but there were Church Camps in Stavert and Mead where we at least got to meet other kids our age. One was a young girl from Mead named Judy Halme who became a good friend through our school days in Hearst. Later, as colleagues at the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, we were fortunate to work on a team involved in the creation of Nunavut, she on the policy side and I on infrastructure.

CHURCH CAMP IN MEAD



Left to Right Liz and Nellie Dahlin, Dorothy Sachowski, Unknown child and mother, Eva Hoskins (Dorothy's Mom), Raili Kari, Kertu Kari, Betsy Killick, Martha Bies, Bill Bies, John Bies, Ernie Bies, Anja and baby Alan Jansson, Taylor Boy (Jack or Elvis?) Sprickerhoff man (Ken or Reid?) Judy Halme and Ingrid Dahlin were in front but were cut off.

SCHOOL DAYS: Being a late December baby, I just made the cut to start school early, which put me at a disadvantage for my whole school life, always being the smallest in the class.

September 1950 was a milestone in family education as we were all in school, I started grade 1 and my sister Olga started grade 12. An early

memory was participating in boxing matches when the grade 8 boys would pit the grade ones against each other. I was the smallest kid in the school, being only 5 and a half when I started, but held my own in these slap-fests and earned the nick-name "Tuffy". The best fighter in the class, by far, was Joan Ard, who gave me my first black eye. Another lasting memory was being introduced to the strap which was common punishment in the early 1950s. My first taste, and certainly not my last, was earned when I was caught peeing in the bushes. Which, in my defence, was normal practice on the farm. Furthermore, I was unfamiliar with indoor plumbing, especially the urinal trough that I could not even reach.



I did make life-long friendships with Jonathan Turner, George

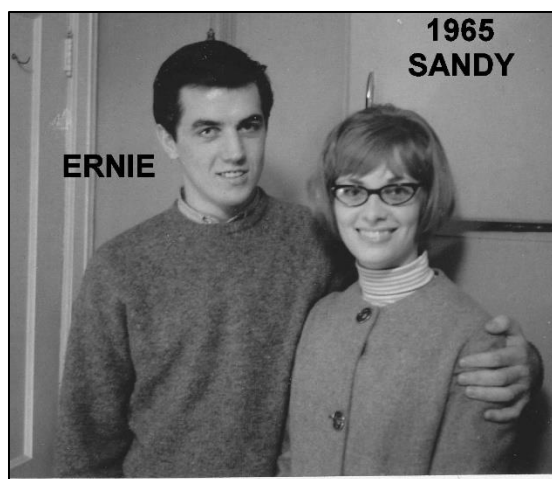


Bosnick, Gordie Lussier, Andy Cowie and with our very special teacher, Miss Ellen Niskanen. Grade one also set the stage for me to meet my



bride 15 years later in Toronto. One of my classmates was Lois Weller who moved to North Bay a couple of years later. In September 1965, after attending a dance at Ryerson, I was walking along Church St. with some new buddies when we saw a group of young ladies across the street. We started a conversation and discovered that they were from North Bay. I said we were neighbours as I was from Hearst. They asked if I knew Lois Weller, what are the

chances of that? She was a high school classmate of theirs and a group of them had come to Toronto for University, nursing, secretarial school and key-punch operator training. We invited them to a party at Denny's the following Saturday and asked them to bring Lois so I could meet her. Judy Haynes, Nancy Duffy and Lois arrived at the party and had brought along another classmate, Sandy Dethridge, and the rest is history. I think we were destined to meet as we discovered later that the year before I was living in an apartment on St. George St. and she was living in the Anglican Woman's Training College residence next door, known as the "Angel Factory". Little did she suspect that "the boy" that her mother had warned her about. was living right next door.



BOMBARDIER: When the Bradlo School was closed in 1949, the children from concessions 2, 3 and 4 were transported to Hearst by bus, originally by Martin's Taxi and then by Bubnick's Taxi. In the winter we travelled by Bombardier along the now abandoned ski-trail that Bradlo teacher, Stella Drajanoff, had used in the 30s.

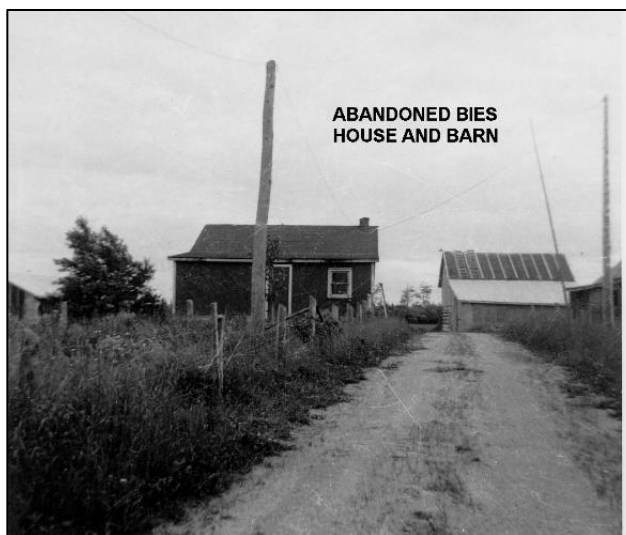


Exciting as it may sound, a Bombardier run often resulted in more than one kid losing his breakfast because of the engine noise and gas smell in an enclosed space. There were benches along both sides and across the back so we sat facing each other about 5 feet apart. Travel was done in darkness both morning and evening. There were several areas flooded by beaver dams that were frozen in winter, that were unpredictable until the ice was thick enough to carry the load. One day, on the way to the farm, the Bombardier broke through the ice and the back end was submerged. The driver got

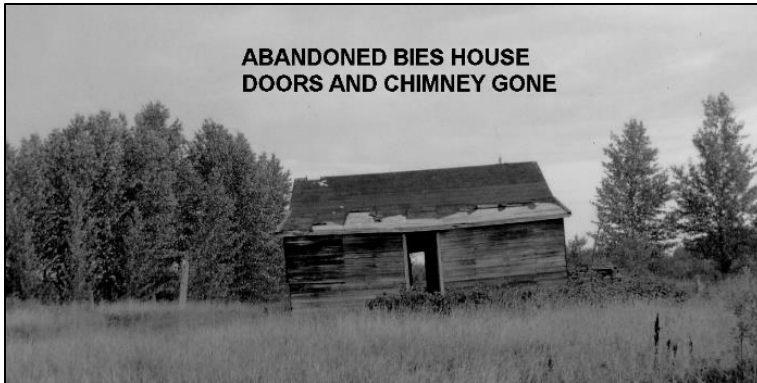
all the panicked kids out the front end, most with soaked feet and trousers, and tried to extricate the vehicle to no avail. He had no choice but to walk back to Hearst to get equipment to do the job. He entrusted the older Bies boys to get their younger siblings and the Bernier kids home along the dark trail. Considering the below freezing temperatures, this involved a lot of coaxing and carrying, but we all arrived at the Bies farm, where Mom sprang into action, warming toes and drying footwear and clothes. She made a huge serving of Halusky, a treat for us but not well received by the Bernier kids. Then the older boys had to walk and carry the Bernier kids another mile to their home further up Bradlo Road.

Eventually with only Rudy, Bill, Martha and Ernie left to transport, the bus service was cancelled. Rudy was enlisted to provide the family taxi service. The Bradlo road was not plowed in the winter, so he stayed in town with our sister Anne and drove out every morning to the Highway 583 junction to pick us up and then drove us back at night. We often had to break a trail through a mile and a half of fresh snow each way, imagining that all the sounds around us were wild animals waiting for one of us to fall behind. We survived, and surprisingly, to this day, I still prefer cold weather over hot.

END OF AN ERA: My parents moved into a small house on Prince St. in Hearst in 1957. No-one could have been more overjoyed than I. Finally, I got to be a town kid: hang out at the Star Café, go to Lumberkings games, walk to school with a hockey stick in hand, fight with the French kids and dodge the curfew police – a dream realized.

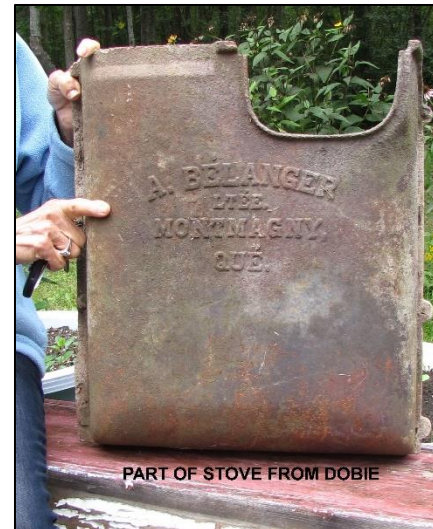


The old homestead did not fare so well. We continued to grow potatoes and some vegetables out there but the house and out-buildings soon showed signs of neglect. Scavengers cleaned out anything that was left inside and then started on the outside, peeling off usable lumber and even stealing the chimney, brick by brick, My Dad accidentally put an end to that



The driveway is totally overgrown now with good sized trees and, unless you knew where to look, you could never find the yard. Olga and I did go there in 2016 and found the depression in the ground where the dugout for the basement was. She salvaged a part of the old stove that my Dad had bought from A. Belanger back in Dobie in 1939.

one summer when he went to burn the grass off the yard. The wind shifted and all he and Mom could do was watch as the house went up in flames.



Growing up on the farm did have many advantages and adventures. We did develop a strong work ethic and a desire to further our education. In my case I developed an insatiable curiosity and quest to explore, whether it be the streets of Toronto in the 60s or the Canadian Arctic in my career as an Engineer with the government. As Jose Kusugak, an Inuit leader that we worked with on the Nunavut project, said in a speech celebrating the tenth anniversary of the creation of Nunavut: “Don’t look behind, where you’ve been, look ahead to where you are going.” Even so, it is sometimes nice to reminisce.

Most photos are from the Bies family albums, others courtesy of Alan Jansson’s Old Hearst Albums, Clayton’s Kids, Ingrid Dahlin Anderson, and internet images.

Thanks to Sandy Bies for editing and to Charles Dobie for posting all my previous stories on his northern Ontario History web-site. To see them please refer to <https://www.ontariohistory.org/#hearst-bies> .