

Grandpa's interview

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Malden-on-Hudson

It was a nice summer day, the sun was shining, and weather was nice, and the Penn II, the fastest tugboat on the Hudson River, was towing an empty oil barge to New York. This happened around 1949 or 1950. The crew were drinking a little it and they went and got stuck on the mudflats by the navigation light. So the only thing they could do was to wait for the high tide to come so the barge could raise itself. So in the meantime the crew went ashore by the barroom at the Riverside Inn and they were drinking beer. And one man was left on board, the engineer. He went to sleep down below on his bunk and he had no idea the tide was rising. The tide rose, the barge began to float, and it floated on top of the tugboat, and sank it with the man down below. So the army engineers they looked for that tugboat high and low and they couldn't find it. One of the local fishermen knew that the tugboat was there, and he went out with his wife and a leadline, and he kept sounding the bottom of the river. Finally they found it and it happened to be at the deepest part of the river – 150 feet – and with a steep incline, it wasn't gradual (the shoreline on the west side goes up straight). And right at the bottom of the cliff in the water, that's where the tugboat lay. In the meantime they couldn't find it so they gave up and called down to New York and they got a diver to come up here to find it. So I came up with the diver. We tried two, three times, but the readings they had were no good. But finally when we got the leadline and you could hear it bouncing on the tugboat (it was made of steel), the diver tried that and sure enough he went down and landed right on top of the tugboat. He tried to get in to find the engineer but the hatchway was so narrow, and the diver's breastplate had blown up with air, so he couldn't get through. He had to come out. Now that we had the barge located, they sent down to the city of New York, and had a derrick come up. So the divers we worked about a week, we could only work in slack tide, see, when the tide was running we couldn't work, so we'd have a break for eight hours. So he went down and he put slings on the tugboat and the derrick up on top and when it was ready he hoisted it up and they took it, got the man out (he was down there about a month). Of course he had a wife that lived upstate New York, maybe Utica, on the waterway. So she come down here to claim the body. Now she turned out to be a fast lady – you know, from one man to another. So while she's down here she's goin' from one guy to another, and one fella even married her! And she took him for everything he had!

Well, in the meantime I was sitting on the rescue barge and I'm lookin' up the Hudson, up toward the cliff where we now live. And one of the fellas says to me, "I used to live up there". And he explained to me that Malden was a peaceful little town with its characters living there, and they all had very interesting parts that they played in the town here. Since the barroom was the place where everybody congregated, that's where all the stories let loose. After I raised the barge I went back to the City, the diver went back to the City, and I said to the diver, "When I get some money I'm going to buy a house up here."

So I bought the house. It was in 1950. I was married, I had little Aris, he was twelve or fourteen, we spent a summer here and he and my wife Helen didn't want to go back to the city. In fact, I brought them up here for the summer, and they wanted to stay. I began to do some fixing around the house and I wanted to put a modern bathtub in. They were wrecking a house in New York City because one of the airports was expanding, and the diver's house was going to be torn down. And the diver I worked with told me I could have anything I want. So I went over and got the bathtub, and they helped me put it on the truck, and I hauled it up to Malden. I go to open the truck door to slide it out and the trailer tips up like a slide and slides down on me, onto the toad. Now I can't move it alone. So I go down to the barroom and there's four, five guys down there. I have a beer, and I says "You know, I'm in trouble. I need help." "What's the problem?" I says, "I got a bathtub on my trailer, when I went to take it off it slid down on the ground and I can't lift it alone. Could somebody come up?" They said, "Sure", so Joe and Ralph come up. Ralph was the owner of the bar, and his wife was the barmaid. Joe and Ralph helped me get the bathtub up. So I went to the barroom, had a few drinks, bought a few rounds, so they said to me, "We're going to give you a nickname. Yours is gonna be Bathtub." So they christened me Bathtub.

In nighttime, when the saloon would close, you could hear guys coming up here at sixty miles an hour, they were really speeding. Well, the sex life here was pretty loose. If you wanted it, it was there. Maybe at home the mother has a boyfriend, and when the daughter sees the boyfriend coming on, she thinks, "I can play that, too!"

Now there were some characters who hung around there all the time, like Bob. He was working the cement plant and Joe come down, Bob and his cousin come down, and some of the workers in Staples brick yard. Story goes that Bob was married with two children but he was a guy that looked for let's say extracurricular work, a ladies' man. He hung around the laundry room in the town ad he's try to pick up the women who came in there, and finally he made a hit, you know? He happened to hit with a big woman who had three children. Her husband had left her. Bob started to teach her how to drive, and they were getting along and this was going on for two, three years. Everybody in town knew it except his wife, Big Rose, and she finds out three years later.

Now you gotta get a picture of Rose. She was six feet tall and big-bosomed. Anyway, Rose finds out who the woman was, so it's a wintry day about a foot and a half of snow on the ground, her husband was going into the public parking lot with his girlfriend at the same time she was. As they pass one another Big Rose recognizes him and stops him and says to the other woman, "So YOU'RE the one that's got the hot pants! I'll cool YOU off!" She grabs her, takes her pants down, and seats her on the snow bank!

Helen and her used to go out shopping at the fruit stands on 9W and we had the farmer who came from Cementon with his horse and wagon loaded with string beans and tomatoes whatever was in season,

and he sold the stuff to the women. Rose said to Helen, "Don't buy nothing, let him make his rounds." Then he'd stop at the bar, he'd have a few rounds, and then whatever vegetables he had left, he'd let them go for nothing! He liked to pinch the ladies. He was a friendly old Polack, a bachelor type.

One time when Helen and Rose were out, they went over on the side of the road, the shoulder was soft, and they got stuck. Helen didn't know what they were going to do. Rose had a Nash, one of them small cars. Helen told me that Rose got out of the car, went to the back of the car, picked it up by the rear bumper, put it on the road. Then she was able to have traction, and she took off! That'll give you an idea of how strong she was. It was nothing to see her grab her husband Bob, he was 180 pounds, by the seat of the pants, and heave him out of the house!

Bob was one of the guys who lived off the land, he hunted and he fished, he went duck huntin', and he was a good shooter with a rifle. So when things got dull in the barroom his cousin would say, "how about showin' us what a sharp shooter you are?" So the cousin would put a cigarette in his mouth. We were all half-bagged, and Bob would come out and shoot the cigarette out of his mouth. And then once in a while Rose would come down lookin' for Bob in the barroom. Another woman who ran the bar, she says, "No, he's not here." So Rose says, "I'm going to come around looking behind that bar", and more often than not, she'd find him hiding there!

The Smiths, when they lived down there, they had ducks that used to go swimmin' up in the river, and at night they'd come back to the house. One day, Alec and Aris chased one duck up the hill right up to our house, opened the door and let the duck in. Now you know how scared Helen could get, well the duck is in the house and she saw it. She stares at that duck, he stares back, starts to walk up the stairs, and Helen screams, "Get that duck out here!" Well, somehow she got over that.

We had a beehive in the house but living in between the walls. There was a hole in the wood and the bees had lived in. Helen was always after me to get rid of the hive, and I kept saying, "Next winter, next winter." Finally, we got friendly with Bettina, whose father had a beehive down there and who handled bees. So they talked it over that they'd come over here and take the bees out. Helen wanted that done. The bees were in the little anteroom. Over the stairway was a little room with a door on it with a little latch on the inside to lift the handle on the outside. So he goes in there, Bettina's father, and Helen takes a piece of rope and ties it on the handle of the door and wraps it around the bedpost. So he's in there working, and he chops a gigantic hole in the wall, four feet by four feet. While he's doing this, something goes wrong and the bees start attacking him. He yells to Helen, "Open the door!" She yells, "Oh, no, I won't" ...If I open it the bees are gonna get ME!", and he's getting stung. He's swearing in German...He breaks the window. In the meantime Bettina was there, my son, me, we had a little congregation watching all this. Finally he gets the window busted, he yells to his daughter to get him out. Helen says, "If you open the door the bees are going to get me. You hold the door locked till I get out into the kitchen and when your father comes out, have him go out on the porch and then come in the other way and go out the other door." Well, she did.

He goes home, two daughters and his wife pulling out the stingers, and they counted 250! He wasn't mad – he came back a few days later, cut out all the honeycombs with the bees, and made four or five beehives out of it for himself.

Now, in the meantime, I'd come from New York City for the week end. Helen says you're going to have to do a little work in the room. I says, "Why?" "Well, I had the man take the bees out. I said, "What do you mean, a little work?" I had to close up that big hole. So I did all that. There was also a nest of mice living in there, so when they busted the hole the tiny mice got into the house. There was one in the bathtub. You go to pick up a bucket, there was one in the bucket. We didn't get them all at one time, we were friendly. My father had come from Massachusetts to Albany and I picked him up and brought him here. So Helen says, I'll cook something for you. So my father and I are sitting down around the table and Helen is in the kitchen. Next thing you know, she starts screaming. I looked at my father and I says, "I know she's a little crazy, but not this crazy." So I says to her, "What's wrong?" "There's a mouse in the oven!" So I got the mouse out of the oven. In the meantime, when the mice started around there, Helen's mother was visiting. She was a six-footer, two hundred pounds. A big woman. The mice got into the living room, so now Helen's mother is standing on the table. Helen was standing on the table, too. And Helen's mother was cursing her out, "You did this on purpose!", blaming Helen for everything. "Get rid of that mouse, Helen!" "No, YOU get rid of it!"

Well, we had one of them picnic tables. When I first came here we didn't have no furniture so I kept anything asking everybody, "You have furniture you don't want?", so I kept collecting furniture. I built one of them tables that had the benches attached and that's why it was so strong. There were THREE of the ladies on top of that table screaming! So finally all the tiny little mice got scared to death.

When I came on weekends I'd do some work on Saturday then I'd go down to the Riverside Bar on a Saturday night and we would have some music playing and there would be some dancing. So I'd blend in there just to pass the night. I was trying to get friendly with them, you know what I mean because I'm a stranger. So once a year at the bar they'd have a clambake, she would cook it up after taxes were paid, and they'd invite everybody around here, maybe fifty a hundred people and they'd set up tables outside and they cooked it all outside. And of course all the characters were there, all the tugboat captains, and their wives and children, the single husky guys, you know, and they would get into a fight after they had a few beers. There was always a fight.

In the meantime, my kids didn't want to cut the grass. One day I'm driving up the highway and about fifty miles down from here there's a sign up, Sheep for Sale. I put the brakes on, stopped, and Helen said, "Where are you going?" I says, "You wait a minute." So I go over there, the farmer had some sheep. I picked a little one out and put it in a burlap bag, and he tied the bag around its neck, then he can't get out. So I put the bag in the car, and she said it was stinking, because the lamb was wetting

himself all the time. So I get the lamb home, put on a collar and chain and keep him. But once in a while he'd get loose. He wouldn't run away, he'd come to me like a dog, you know what I mean? So every year I'd buy a lamb, every year Helen and Ruth would butcher it and we'd have a nice lamb dinner. Trixie is one I remember. She was a great lawnmower! Every year we took it off our taxes under Lawn Maintenance.

On Halloween the kids had to have fun here, so what do you think the prank was that they pulled? Bob and Rose were living in that house and there was a son and a daughter. On the cliff part of the Dooley's there was an outhouse. So they pushed it over the cliff! People used that outhouse when I first came, in 1950. My house had a toilet, all the others had outhouses. There were selected houses, some of the good houses had toilets, lots of them had outhouses.

The children were at Malden Graded School up here, and when the hunting season would come one, the teacher would go hunting for a day or two. So one year he went out, and he killed a cow. After that the kids would tease him, "Are you going out deer hunting this week?", and he'd get mad.

Well, Mrs. James's lived by the river and her husband was always smoking a pipe, he died from that. The house was always full of smoke, she had inhaled it over the years, and the next thing you know she got cancer and said she was moving away. She said to me, "I have bad memories here." "What's the bad memory?" "My daughter went out here and drowned herself in the river."

In winter, Gerhardt used to come and ski down the hill here. This is where he learned to ski, right behind my house. In the old days, when they used to harvest ice, we used to have sail boats. They'd make runners and have a sail on it and you'd ride on it and the wind would blow you around on the ice. You see, now they have the icebreakers to break up the ice, but in the thirties, nothing went up the river. If it went up and froze, it just stayed there. One year it froze so bad the Coast Guard sent a boat up and they were breaking the ice. They got as far as Malden, they couldn't move, they got frozen in. So all the people who lived up the street, the children, too, they all ran to see what was happening. Miller's wife, she told me one of those guys chased her. Her husband used to get bagged most every Saturday and you'd hear him roaring, he had one of those voices, and he had this tall woman, his wife, she was all skin and bones. After he died she stayed a widow. Most of the women stayed widows.

We had ice houses by the river. They were owned by Knickerbocker, and the Benzenhoeffer's house was the office. Prior to that it was the office of the company that sent bluestone for the sidewalks of New York. Well, when they stopped using ice, was in the early thirties, thirty two thirty three – the stone foundations by the river are actually the foundations of the ice houses. And they had conveyor belts that took the ice off to slide it in place and store it in the ice houses. We also had that up in my hometown in Lowell, Massachusetts. And they'd hire twenty, thirty guys when they were harvesting because the ice would get a foot and a half thick and the horses would walk across and cut it. They would walk on the river or right on the land and they had some kind of a tool that would make a crevice,

and then when they'd go on the conveyor they'd break into pieces. They were two foot wide a foot and a half thick and four feet long in chunks like that. A similar process happened in Malden.

There were some sad times. On the Esopus Canal in the old days there was a steel foundry and when they had this extra, whatever was left over, the scrap they would put it in big, big cast iron buckets and the horses would tow it out in the river, and they would dump it. Sometimes the horses went through the ice and would drown. And every year somebody would drown in the lake up in Saugerties, opposite Seamon Park. Bob's son was a six-footer, but he wasn't filled out. He married some girl from Saugerties, He had a eye that didn't look straight, but he was a good lookin' boy, you know? So one night they had an argument and he went up to Catskill along 9W with a couple of the McMann brothers, they were another gang. On the way back on 9W on that turn there was no light and he was half-bagged, he goes underneath a trailer that was taking the turn and it killed him. And his father Bob, who worked at the Maquette cement plant, had to drive by that spot every day when he went to work.

