

Keep Stories Alive

Story Title: 52 Centre Street

Author: Marian Berry

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A note from the interviewer, James Russell:

I met the author after she contacted the Danvers Historical Society with an interest in telling a story. Marian Berry, the author of this recollection lived with her grandparents at 52 Center St. in Danvers for one year in the 1920's. Marian has an encyclopedic memory as you can see by the details presented here. She was in town to celebrate the 60th Anniversary of her graduation from Gordon College. She is a renaissance woman, having had many pursuits in her (to date) 88 years: civil air patrol in high school, college, postgraduate study at college, military service as a cryptographer, language tutor, piano and organ teacher to mention a few.

I'm starting this delightful journey from the place where I was born: Beverly Hospital, August 5, 1928.

It was the time of the great depression. Thousands of people were without work, money, food, and other necessities. Long food lines were everywhere. My daddy was one of those unfortunate people. For awhile he went door-to-door selling Watkins Products, but it wasn't enough to pay rent, buy food, etc.

At the beginning of my third birthday, my mother's parents, Susie L. and Fred Sawyer agreed to let us stay with them at 52 Centre Street. We lived there for about a year. I guess Grammie and Grandpa struggled to help all they could and ultimately could not continue. So, when I was four years old, we moved to a home in Salem where we lived all of my school years through high school and then college. This story is about my one-year stay at 52 Centre Street. Although I will soon be 88 years old and not as spry and healthy as I used to be, I clearly remember a lot of things about my year at Grammie and Grandpa's house at 52 Centre St. in Danvers, MA, including the six party telephone line: 365-J. Everyone else would hear your conversation.

Grammie Susie had three children: Ethel Louise, Evelyn, and Doris. Doris had three children: Barbara, Muriel and Buddy. Doris lived close by. We only had to drive down Hobart St. and take the first left turn to her farmhouse where she and Uncle Doug lived. We would see them often at Grammie's. Aunt Dot gave me the first pet I ever had, a kitten I named Spunky after Shirley Temple's horse.

Muriel got married and moved away. Her marriage name was Sweeney. Her husband's family ran the excursion boats at the Salem Willows for years. I don't remember her having children. Barbara married and had two children: Susan and Skippy. Susan came to live in our home in later years. I lost complete track of Skippy. I really don't know what Buddy's real name was. He joined the navy and we finally lost track of him.

Aunt Evelyn married Roland Farrin. They lived at 73 Locust St., across from Lindall Hill. "Rolly" delivered milk for many years and Evelyn worked in the baby shoe factory. She had a baby girl, Janice, the same year I was born and later, a son, Roger. My mother and Aunt Evelyn were very close. Evelyn had a car and we didn't. When she went to the beach or visiting relatives, she would usually take mama and me with her and Janice.

My One Year Experience in Danvers

First, let's talk about the living conditions. These were the days of kerosene lamps, outhouses and black iron stoves. (These things I remember vividly.) When we first arrived at 52 Center St., we had to get used to the outhouse, located down on the hilly back yard. Yes, it did have a Sears Catalog in it. It had two toilet holes. If only one was used, you might find creepy spiders in the other one. Oh yes, there was always a pot under the

bed if you had to go at nighttime. But then, in the morning, of course it must be emptied. HURRAH! I remember when the big day arrived, and the new indoor toilet was installed at the left rear corner of the kitchen

The only heat was from the old black iron stove in the kitchen. I remember taking my bath in a huge round tub on the kitchen floor in water heated on the stove. Since there was no running hot water, Grammie always washed the dishes in cold water. The huge kitchen went the entire length of the back of the house. It had two large windows on the back side and one on the right side.

Grammie loved birds. She had bird feeders in all of the windows where we could sit for hours watching the birds chirping and feeding; hopping around the feeders and eating their share. We could look out the windows and down into the hilly back yard to see the raspberry bushes and the neighbor's cows in the large pasture which bordered our property. There were also shrubs, trees and flowers decorating the landscape. It was quite scenic.

There was another big cheer when we got a large pot-belly stove installed near the back wall of the living room. Wow! It was great to have that to snuggle up to on those very cold days. One catch: There was still no heat in the three upstairs bedrooms. Sometimes my cousin Janice and I would stay all night together, and to keep warm in the bed, we would have big feather pillow fights and crawl under the puffy layers of bed clothes. What fun! Grammie and Grandpa kept warmer since their downstairs bedroom was heated from the stove. My mom and dad slept upstairs like I did.

Grammie did a lot of cooking and baking; also, gathering her children and grandchildren for big holiday feasts around the huge dining room table. When we first moved in, there was only the old black stove. She did all her cooking and baking there. I loved it when she made doughnuts or other treats, and I had doughnut holes to eat or warm molasses cookies. Of course there was nothing better than a big holiday dinner with all the fixings: turkey, squash, potatoes, stuffing, veggies and, of course, homemade pumpkin or apple pie and good old cider.

Now let's talk about Grandpa and his living room. A good part of his time was spent here. The living room went the whole length of the house front with a hall leading to the upstairs. And that new pot-belly stove made things so much warmer and pleasant. Of course, Grammie spent a lot of time here, too. This is where she played the piano and harmonica together and this is where I had my first piano experience. I watched her and tried to imitate her but didn't do very well. I closed my hands into fists and started rolling them back and forth. It sounded something like "Ump Ba, Ump Ba, Ump Ba Ba." It had quite a beat. It reminded me of an Indian war chant. This was my first piano lesson (or experience). It was also interesting how she had the harmonica attached to a support around her neck so she could play both instruments together.

Grandpa was his own kind of man. When he ate his meals in the kitchen, he would mostly stab his meat and other solid foods with his fork, then turn it upside down before putting it in his mouth. If he really got "mad," he would sometimes throw things. I remember him throwing a slipper at one of Aunt Dot's girls because she wouldn't obey. He worked for a time as a conductor and flagman on a train. My cousin Janice said he had also worked for the Electric Company. I think he had retired when we lived in his home. Most of his spare time was spent either sitting in his "Morris" chair reading, listening to records on his Edison phonograph, or working upstairs in his "workshop" making birdhouses and outdoor ornaments which he later sold. He would often spend the evening with my daddy playing cards: cribbage, pinochle, or maybe just playing solitaire.

In front of the house was a large parking space where Grandpa always parked his "Bluebird" car. That was what it was named. I have no idea of the make of the car. This is the same space where he put his homemade items for sale.

Grandpa was a member of the Odd Fellows organization and belonged to Essex Lodge #26 in Salem. At that time, neither he nor Grammie traveled much. I loved them both dearly. As far as I can remember, they lived in that house until Grandpa passed away. I think this happened when I was in the fourth grade after we moved to Salem. We attended the Wesley Methodist Church there. It was a special day there -- It was Odd Fellows Sunday. My dad was also an Odd Fellows member. Grandpa was to attend, but he never made it. Before the program began, my mother's Aunt Myra called the church and notified my dad that Grandpa had just passed away.

I remember many of the nice people in the neighborhood of 52 Centre St. There was a huge white house across the street on the corner of Centre and Hobart streets. The lot of land was surrounded by large boulders, making a wall about three feet high. This was the parsonage of the Myers family. Mr. Myers was the pastor of the Congregational Church on the opposite corner of Hobart Street. It was there I attended Sunday School each week and my cousin Janice says Grammie was serving there as a deaconess. Pastor and Mrs. Myers had two children. The girl's name was Judith. She had a brother, but I don't remember his name. Judy and I were good playmates and spent a lot of time together in her yard. It was also fun playing there and sitting on that big front wall and watching people go by.

I used to have fun watching for the trolley car that came by the house several times a day. My uncle, Frankie Dwinell, was its driver. When Uncle Frank neared our house, he would stop and say "Hi" if he had no passengers. I believe the trolley was headed for Tapleyville in one direction. I'm not sure of its destination in the other direction.

Looking toward the right side of Grammie's house was a family by the name of Espignola. Mr. and Mrs. Espignola had several children, all older than I. They had a large lot of land, part of which extended across the back of Grandpa's land. They had cows, chickens, cats and a couple of horses. He grew his own vegetables. The family was always nice to our family. He would let me go into the barn and visit the cows. I was also allowed to help collect eggs from the chickens. I always loved to go to the back of Grammie's yard and talk to the cows.

Things were different in those days. My mother was always into decorating things. Every year on May 1st, May Day was celebrated by hanging baskets of candy on neighbors' front doors. We made the baskets from small paper cups. We gathered crepe paper on the sewing machine, making 1 1/2 " slits on the edge and crimp and twist them to make them look like flowers; then, attach pretty colored pipe cleaners for handles and add crepe streamers hanging from the bottom of the cup. They would then be filled with candy and hung on the neighborhood doors.

Another enjoyable thing in Tapleyville and all other surrounding areas was the July 4th celebration. There was great competition among the fire companies to see which one could produce the largest display of burning barrels. This would happen every year. The barrels were set off at midnight on July 3. It was always fun to be at the top of the Ferris wheel to watch the ignition of the barrels. People would stay and watch them burn all night, and they were still smoldering in the early morning. Other events included a large carnival, usually a doll carriage parade contest, and later a band concert. The amusements were always open late, too. These were the good old days and provide such wonderful memories of 52 Centre Street in Danvers.