



Martha sitting on the dock by the pond. The boat is in the foreground.
(MJ)

to tease this bull. “We used to call to it and then hide in the woods, and it would come running at us like a train! Then it would walk back, and we’d call it again.” Ed seemed to remember that this huge bull had later killed Mr. Ellis.

The girls tended to have tamer adventures. Mary and Helen used to like to go to a big rock in the woods across the road from the farmhouse. They would bring their dolls and play house there. Martha, who was more of a tomboy, spent a good

a hay field, there stands a grove of pine trees. Ed said his father had planted all of those pines sometime after World War II. Władysław was given the trees from the state for free as part of a land reclamation program.

In the winter the family would go skating on this pond the boys had made. The Wisniewski children also would go skating on some of the nearby swamps, skating in and around the trees. Sometimes they would head up to skate on Ellis’ pond. This was the pond that had been created for Mr. Ellis to harvest ice for his icehouse.

Entertainment came in many forms. George Ellis unknowingly provided some of the boys with another pastime. Mr. Ellis, who was one of the closest neighbors to the farm, lived up on the hill on Old Jewett City Road. He owned a huge Ayrshire bull. Paul said, “That bull was twice as big as any of ours. It was a monster.” So naturally, Ed and Paul decided it would be fun

deal of time with her older brothers. “Ed and Paul were good to me. I was their tag along. Helen acted like a lady and stayed home and sewed or prettied herself, but I would fish, swim, hike, and climb trees with the boys. They taught me to ride a bike and to drive the car. They even took me to my first dance and taught me how to dance.” She continued, “We had a large tree in the front yard, and the boys put up a large rope swing. I used to spend hours swinging—sometimes sitting, sometimes standing, and mostly singing. The tree was on the corner of the property by the road. Years later lightning struck the tree and split it in two.” All of the children would play games, such as checkers, hoops, jacks, marbles, jump rope, hopscotch, and peggy. Peggy was played with two sticks. The first stick, which was about five inches long and was shaved down to a point at both ends, would be placed on the ground. They would take another, slightly longer stick and hit the first one so that it jumped into the air. As the pointed stick was up in the air, they would hit it again and try to aim it at a circle drawn in the dirt. The one who got it closest to the circle was the winner.

There was an old path that started by the chicken coops across the street from the house that led back to some of the fields. Right at the beginning of the path on the left, there is a pit with sandy soil. They used to use this sand to fill in holes around the farm. The children used to play in the sand pit. Ed explained, “We didn’t have many bought toys. We just made believe we had something. Anything we could find with a wheel on it, like a piece of a machine—we made believe it was a car. We made tunnels and trails through the sand. We did have a wagon from somewhere to play with.” Further up the hill on the path near the sand pit, there is a large flat rock on the left. Ed remembered spending much time there playing as a child. The red shed, which is tucked in by the entrance of this path, right on the corner of the road across from the farmhouse, was built by Paul after he was married. He used it to store some of his things when he and his wife, Louise, were living in their house trailer on the farm.

In the springtime, the boys would sometimes make their own slide whistles out of ash branches. They would cut a section of an ash branch about as round as your finger and about five inches long. They would cut a triangle-shaped notch out of the top and then slice a groove through the bark all the way around.



Slide whistle made by Ed (with a piece of tape to keep the wood from splitting). (CW)

Then by twisting the bark they could remove it in one piece, leaving them with a solid inner piece of wood and a tube of bark, which could slide over it. They would blow into a flattened groove near the top notch, and by sliding the bark back and forth over the whistle they were able to change the pitch of the sound the whistle made.

Martha had memories of when she was little and her brother Tony would come visit the farm. He was living in Mystic at the time. Tony had a Model-A Ford with a rumble seat in the back. He would take the children out for rides, or they would just sit in the rumble seat while the car was parked at the farm and pretend. Walter has a photo of himself when he was still quite young sitting in his father's old 1929 Dodge Touring car. Walter said, "I used to drive it around the fields when I was young, and one time I drove it right into the swamp and I couldn't get it out. I went and hid from Pop, but eventually I had to come home for dinner. They got the car out," he laughed, "but I can't say what happened to me!"

The whole family and Władysław in particular used to sing a great deal. He taught the children many religious songs as well as some Polish folk songs. All of the children remembered one song he taught them called "On Monday Morning" (*W Poniedziałek Rano*)⁵² about a farmer who does a different chore every day of the week. Mary and Martha mentioned another song that was about a lady who loses her pants.

There was a large wooden RCA Victor victrola in their house. It was kept in the middle room where the potbelly stove stood. They had record albums from the 1920s—Rudy Vallée, waltzes, and marches. The victrola had a crank on the side to make it play. It had doors on the bottom that could be used to regulate the sound. If the doors were kept open, the music would be louder. To make the



Walter in his
father's 1929
Dodge Touring
car. (WW)

music quieter, they would close the doors. They owned an old pump organ that had pedals that would have to be pumped with your feet to make the bellows work. However, no one can remember anyone ever playing it. Ed also recalled that there was an old cylinder record player that was kept up in the attic space above the kitchen, where they stored nuts. On rainy days Ed said he would go up there and play it. The cylinder player was oval shaped and perhaps twenty inches long and ten inches wide with a round top, which was made out of wood. When you lifted the top cover, there was a mechanism inside with a tube that could hold a cylinder. They had many interchangeable grooved cylinders made of wax. The cylinders themselves were maybe two inches in diameter and five inches long. He would insert a cylinder in the player and then wind up a crank on the side to make it spin. As the cylinder spun, there was an arm with a needle on it, which would ride over the cylinder, and the music would play. No one remembers what became of this player. Perhaps at some point Władysław sold it to a traveling merchant.

ON A MONDAY MORNING

W Poniedziałek Rano

Polish Haying Song

1 On a Mon - day morn - ing, sun - ny Mon - day morn - ing, ,
 1. *W po - nie - dzia - tek ra - no, ko - sił oj - cieć sia - no,*

Sowed our seed, *ta - tuś** and I, Sowed it when the sun was high.
Ko - sił oj - cieć, ko - sił ja, Ko - si - liś - my o - by - dwa.

Sowed our seed, *ta - tuś* and I, Sowed it when the sun was high.
Ko - sił oj - cieć, ko - sił ja, Ko - si - liś - my o - by - dwa.

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| 2. On a Tuesday morning, sunny Tuesday morning,
Mowed our hay, <i>tatus</i> and I,
Mowed it when the sun was high | 2. <i>A we wtorek rano, grabił ojciec siano,
Grabiał ojciec, grabił ja,
Grabiliśmy obydwu.</i> |
| 3. On a Wednesday morning, sunny Wednesday morning,
Dried our hay, <i>tatus</i> and I,
Dried it when the sun was high | 3. <i>A we środę rano, suszył ojciec siano,
Suszył ojciec, suszył ja,
Suszyliśmy obydwu.</i> |
| 4. On a Thursday morning, sunny Thursday morning,
Raked our hay, <i>tatus</i> and I,
Raked it when the sun was high | 4. <i>A we czwartek rano, zwoził ojciec siano,
Zwoził ojciec, zwoził ja,
Zwoziliśmy obydwu.</i> |
| 5. On a Friday morning, sunny Friday morning,
Hauled our hay, <i>tatus</i> and I,
Hauled it till the dusk was nigh | 5. <i>A zaś w piątek rano, sprzedał ojciec siano,
Sprzedał ojciec, sprzedał ja,
Sprzedaliśmy obydwu.</i> |
| 6. On a Saturday morning, sunny noon and evening,
Sold our hay, <i>tatus</i> and I,
Sold it when the night was nigh | 6. <i>A w sobotę rano, przepił ojciec siano,
Przepił ojciec, przepił ja,
Przepiliśmy obydwu.</i> |
| 7. On a Sunday morning, bright and sunny morning,
Bowed our heads, <i>tatus</i> and I,
Thanked the Lord who dwelled on high. | 7. <i>A w niedzielę z rana, już nie było siana,
Płakał ojciec, płakał ja,
Płakaliśmy obydwu.</i> |

Tatus is an affectionate word for father in Polish.



Władysław's
Victor victrola.
(CC)



Early on, the family had a large cabinet radio in the house. This was before they had electricity on the farm, so they used a car battery to power the radio instead. They would turn the radio on for maybe five minutes to hear the news and then turn it off to save the battery. Charging the battery was a big ordeal; it was large, and the only way to charge it was to take it out and put it into the car. They owned two batteries so while one was charging in the car, the other was in the radio. As a result, they didn't get to listen to much music or many radio shows until later on when they bought a radio that was powered by electricity. By the time Martha came around, she remembers the family gathering around to listen to such radio shows as *The Shadow*, *Amos and Andy*, and *The Lone Ranger*.

As the children got older, they began working off the farm and dating. This allowed them to enjoy some of the many choices of entertainment that Norwich had to offer. In those days there were three theaters in town: the Broadway, the Palace, and the Strand. The Broadway, which was located on Broadway

near the City Hall, was the most elegant. It used to attract big name entertainment. Frank Sinatra, Glen Miller, Tommy Dorsey, The Andrew Sisters, Benny Goodman, The McGuire Sisters, and Vaughn Monroe all played at the Broadway. For an admission fee of fifty cents, patrons were treated to an evening of entertainment, including a full show with dancers and singers followed by a headline act. The Broadway had a large stage for performers and seats both on the main floor and in the balcony upstairs. Bands traveled between Norwich and Hartford, Connecticut, so if anyone missed them in one location, they had the opportunity to catch them in the other. Tony once took Ed and Paul when they were in their teens up to the State Theater in Hartford. Ed remembered, “The State Theater was real nice, and they would get big name bands and orchestras to play there every weekend. Tony took us there, and afterwards he took us out to eat at a Chinese restaurant up on the second floor on Main Street. That was the first time Paul and I had ever had Chinese food. We didn’t know what to get, but Tony knew how to order for us all. We were served noodles and rice and more stuff than we had ever seen before. That was something special.” The second theater in town was the Palace, which was located down on Ferry Street. They primarily showed movies, although they also had a stage, which could be used for live entertainment or to host events. For many years, The American Thermos Bottle Company would host their annual company Christmas show at the Palace.⁵³ The Thermos would invite all of their employees along with their families for an afternoon of holiday entertainment. At these parties, the Palace would show cartoons and a Christmas movie, and then Santa would arrive and hand out presents to all of the children. The presents would be stacked high in two piles—one for girls and one for boys. The third theater in Norwich was the Strand down on Water Street. This was the least expensive theater in town, and it earned the nickname the “Scratch House” since it was so cheap, you might end up getting bugs just by being there. At the Strand they would show a feature movie along with a newsreel, cartoons, and previews of coming attractions. Each moviegoer was given a plate, cup, or bowl every time they bought a ticket so they could collect a set of dishes, if they could afford to go often enough. All of this was given for the admission price of ten cents. Ed said his brother Tony took him and Paul to their first movie when he



The family celebrates the christening of Ed's first child, Richard. Left to right: Tony, Walter, Dorothy in front, Irene Planeta (Betty's niece), Joan, Martha, Helen holding her daughter, Linda, and Mary holding her daughter, Liz. Władysław and Dominica are visible in the mirror. 1949. (MJ)

was about ten years old. He thought it was a western, since cowboy movies were very popular at the time.

In the summer there were often events held at the Fairgrounds in Norwich. The Fairgrounds were at the intersection of West Main Street and New London Turnpike. It was a nice flat piece of land owned by the city. They would hold different events there: balloon rides, airplane rides, horse shows, circuses, and carnivals. Fireworks used to be set off from the fairgrounds on the Fourth of July, before they were moved to a barge in the harbor. In the winter people could go skating on Ford's Pond, which was right near the Fairgrounds. They dammed the pond, and then in the fall they would burn off all the vegetation and flood it so they had a nice pond for skating. They built a little lean-to by the pond and had benches there so people could put on their skates. It was something everyone looked forward to every year.

Right and
opposite: the
family gathers at
the farm. (CW)



Of course, there were other simpler pleasures to be had for free. Martha remembered, “In the summer Pa would drive to Ocean Beach with everyone in their Sunday clothes, and we would take off our shoes and stand in the water just about to our ankles. Pa would roll up his pants and hold my hand as our feet sank deeper and deeper into wet sand as the waves washed over our feet. Neither Ma or Pa could swim.” Closer to home, they occasionally found some unexpected forms of entertainment. Martha described one such time. “One evening very late, someone noticed that the sky was all colors, and I guess the grownups thought it must be the end of the world. We were all called out of the house to see the aurora borealis or northern lights. It was the most magnificent display of the sky that I can recall.” Ed also had a strong memory of this night. “The sky was just brilliant with colors—very unusual. The lights just kept changing in the sky from minute to minute like flares.” There was only this one time the aurora borealis was visible and only for one night, but it was quite a display.



Some of the best times the family had were spent in each other's company. Whenever they could, the family would gather together at the farm in groups large or small. They would have food and a few drinks, while they shared some laughs and caught up on the latest news of the family.