

RALPH WEHMER'S STORIES

*As told to Olga Smith, BJC Hospice Lumina Project Volunteer, June 2007 --
shared with permission of Ralph's daughter, Susan*

I have so many stories to tell you. Where do I begin? Well, I was born in a log cabin, one mile down from this house. Back then, our street was called Accommodation Road, and it was a dirt road. Now, the street is called Old Jamestown Road.

Growing up, my brothers and I would ride a corn grinder and it would go round and round like a merry-go-round. One afternoon, my brother and I were riding on it and Ed came out of the house and yelled at us: "Do not put your hands in there! Next thing I knew, I put my hand in the grinder and I lost part of my finger. [Holds up his hand] Boy, did I cry -- for hours. Because the nearest doctor was in Florissant, we drove our Model-T car. Because the road was dirt, we hitched it to a team of mules and we headed down the street to Salem Baptist Church with the reins through the windshield opening. We left the mules at the church and drove on into Florissant to the doctor's office. Every time we went to the doctor's, this is how we traveled. I can even remember my doctor's name, Dr. Milmann.

When I think of my father, I will tell you one thing: he was a smart guy. My father gave my three brothers, Louis, Jim, Bob and I a proposition. The proposition was: if we did not drink or smoke before the age of 21, he would give us a gold watch and \$100. Well, a \$100 was a lot of money back then, so we all made it and he had to pay us. I think that was a pretty smart idea.

While growing up, our neighbor's house, down the road, caught on fire. One night my dad caught me building a fire in our family room and asked, "What are you doing?" I responded, "I want a new house." I was around 4 or 5 years old.

One foggy morning, around 8:30, while outside, at school, we heard a noise that caught our attention. That was Brown School, which is now a residence right down the road here, near Carrico Road, across from the church. We saw a plane coming down low in front of our school. The plane was really low, probably 50 feet in the air. The plane would come down low and go back up again. As the plane came down low, he cut the engine and hollered, "Where's the nearest airport?" We pointed in the direction of the airport, which was then Anglum, Missouri [now Robertson]. We kids made a 'human arrow'. The oldest kid, Bill Brinker, organized us. He circled back around and yelled down, "Thank you!" The person in the plane happened to be Charles Lindbergh! [At the time, there were spotlights every 10 miles from Alton, over Vaile to Florissant and on to the airport for pilots to find their way. It was so foggy that morning, that he couldn't see them.]

That same year, I graduated from the eighth grade, at the age of 13. One afternoon, in August, my mother took me to Ferguson (and I drove the car) to enroll in high school. I asked, "How am going to get to school?" She said, "Son, you are going to drive to school." Even though I was only 13, I drove myself to school every day.

That is, until, one day I saw a very good-looking girl and she asked for a ride. On the way home, her father (Ferguson's only police man) stopped us. [Florissant had only one police officer, and he was the town drunk!] He looked at me and said, "How old are you, young man?" "I'm 16", I said. He nailed me. "I'll bet you're not a day over 13". Then, he went on to say, "If I ever see you driving again, I will inform the Ferguson law enforcement about your age and you will go to jail!" So, I quickly came home and told my dad that I could not go to high school anymore. He would not allow that, so he had me drive the car to C.J. Lumber Co. and park the car and told me: "Forget that girl."

After I parked the car, I walked the rest of the way to school, crossing over the railroad tracks. Whenever a snowstorm was coming I went straight to the principal to inform her of my situation and she would let me go home. She was real good like that. After four years, I graduated from Ferguson High School.

At the age of 19, I earned a job at the Florissant Post Office, as a postal clerk and worked at that for 11 years. Al Pondriem was the Post Master. After that, I was a Rural Mail Carrier for 25 years. I truly enjoyed that job, because of all of the people that I met. I once received Missouri's Outstanding Rural Letter Carrier Award.

While working at the Post Office, we received a letter addressed to "Grandma", sent from someone in Potosi. Everyone in the office thought that there was no way that we would find "Grandma". After I gave it a little thought, I knew who that "Grandma" might be. I told the guys that I would deliver it. I headed down to Lindsey Lane.

Everyday, outside the Bauer's house on Lindsey Lane, a little boy would greet me and I always gave him a piece of candy. And, the Bauer's received a lot of mail from the Potosi area. So, I blew the horn and I asked Mrs. Bauer if she was missing a letter. Well, she could not believe it.

Since I usually ended my routes around 1:30 p.m., I took a job as a bus- driver for the Hazelwood School District. I worked for the Hazelwood District for 25 years. There was one incident that I will never forget. If you can imagine, things have changed since was a bus-driver. One day, while driving, one of my third graders called me a 'son of a bitch'. I told the principal of the situation and the principal suspended him. The next day, the principal, the parents and I had a meeting. The principal would not allow him to ride the bus until he apologized to me and he finally did. Can you believe that a third grader said that?

Another story that I like to tell is when I was traveling down Halls Ferry Road. I looked to the back of the bus in my rear view mirror and noticed food and garbage flying out of the bus window. So, I took Old Halls Ferry Road and headed back to the high school. I had two girls go get the principal, who was my brother- in-law Larry Fuqua. Larry came out and we discussed the situation, and I decided to just sit there. The bad kids left the bus. The kids started hollering at me about leaving those kids. I told the kids, "We're going to sit here until everyone is quiet. I'm paid by the hour, so I don't care." Boy, did they get quiet.

One more story about my bus-driving days. Well, I decided to take the route with the African-American kids. I always got a kick out of them, because they were always so much fun. They would rub my head and say, "We like our bus- driver!" It always made me feel really good.

I will tell you that my brother Jim was a really honest person. He worked for Riverview Stone and Material for years. While working, his boss asked him, "What are you paying those African-American drivers? Jim told him that he was paying them the same as the white men. And, his boss went on to say that he should dock the African-American's pay. Well, Jim disagreed and said, "No" and quit. He walked out of the office (and he had 12 kids!), but he disagreed with things like that. The Lord works in mysterious ways, because shortly after he quit, Jim found a job at Westlake Quarry with a better salary.

Here's another story about Jim. One of Jim's kids went to feed the dog in their big barn. Well, while feeding the dog, his son was playing with a match and ended up lighting the barn on fire. At the time of the fire, Jim was all the way in Anglum [now Robertson] and he could see the smoke from there, but he had no idea it was coming from his barn. When Jim got home and realized the damage, he said we should all stick around. "We're going to make something of this fire" and he went to the store to get hot dogs and buns so that we could have a "Wiener Roast."

SHEARING SHEEP - THE RIGHTEOUS RAM ISAIAH 53:7

My dad had 40 head of sheep. We had no telephone. He would drive 40 miles to Wentzville to get a sheep shearer. Ed Love

sent one of his workers to Columbia, Missouri to learn how to shear sheep. So, I said, "When he learns how, tell him to come shear my Dad's sheep." A week passed and I said, "Well, Ed, how's the boy making out with the sheep?" He said, "He didn't learn nothin'". So, he loaned me his clippers. The Post Master gave me the day off to go shear my Dad's sheep. When I got there, the old sheep shearer came on. The Merino had a wrinkled neck. He gave me the Shropshire and he took the Merinos. Well, I sat that thing down on its rump and sheared him.

It's in Isaiah 53:7: He was like a sheep before the shearer. (By the end of the day- we were able to keep up with the old sheep shearer.) I even took some sheep downtown to the Famous Barr store when they had a Folk Fair right on the street. I could shear a sheep in two minutes and 55 seconds- the fastest sheep shearer in town.

I asked if I could bring some school kids to watch the shearing and got permission to do that. One year, 76 busloads of kids came in one week. There's 10 pounds of wool on a sheep. It sold for 40 cents a pound down at the Fur Exchange.

I went to Defiance, New Melle, Wentzville, Wright City, and Troy to shear sheep. I had the contract with Monsanto to shear sheep at their test farm. One time, I had 400 sheep to shear by the end of the month. Another time, they gave me seven lambs. I took them to the stockyards and sold them for \$725. They also gave me 200 chickens. I put them in my mother's barn. We dressed about 20 of them that night. That was enough. I found the Boschert Turkey

Farm in St. Charles and they dressed and froze them for 35 cents a head.

One of the rams wandered off to the Salem Church grounds and caught sight of himself in the church windows. He thought it was another ram and charged "him" (his reflection). He made a real mess in that church. [*The ram's head is stuffed and hanging on the wall of the living room fireplace*]

June 29, 2007, Florissant, Missouri

Documented by Olga S. Smith

RALPH WEHMER'S STORIES II – July 2007

MORE SHEARING SHEEP STORIES and OTHERS as told to Susan and Ginny

When I would take school kids to the farms around here, one of them was the Twillman Farm on Old Halls Ferry Road near what is Parc Argonne Subdivision, now. Mr. Twillman just loved those kids. He'd laugh so, and his belly would just shake. He really enjoyed having those kids on his farm.

There was another farmer on Vaile whose sheep I used to shear: [Jane and John Doe]. He was a really good farmer and a hard worker. But, when it rained, he liked to drink. He'd go over to the Harry Rosenkoetter's Tavern at Shovel Town on Lindbergh and Old Halls Ferry. He had about 40 sheep and I went over there to shear them one day. It was raining and [Jane] said that [John] couldn't help me (because he was drunk). She also said that they were penned up. I said that I thought if they were penned up, that I could do it myself. Pretty soon [John] came along. He was a bit tipsy. He picked up a bale of straw (thinking it was a sheep) and wrestled that bale, telling it, "You can't get away from me. Now you sit down." He was really a hard working man and a good farmer.

That ram that destroyed the church was a mean one. When my mother would be working in the garden, he would butt her. It turned out, we found out later, that his horns were growing back into its head and making him crazy.

My cousin, Ed Hume, owned a Star brand car. I had a brand new Mackinaw coat. I wore it to church on a rainy day. Mom invited the Hume's to come over for dinner. I rode home on Nosey the horse. I had to climb a fence or stand on a box to get on him. [He was named Nosey because he could open gates and doors with his nose. He had to have a halter on when he was in the barn at night.]

Ed drove up behind me and honked the horn. The horse jumped and I fell off in the mud. My new coat got all muddy and I cried and cried and Mom and Ed tried to comfort me. I was about 5 years old then.

When Nosey did get out, Dad loaded up a shotgun with rock salt and shot him in the rump, and Nosey would run for the barn.

My Mom, Aurelia, [her maiden name was Thompson] walked out of the kitchen door one day to throw out some dishwater. We had to buy water for the cistern and we used all of it (dishwater, bathwater, etc.) to water the flowers. She stood on the wooden lid of the cistern and it gave way and she fell into the cistern. She threw out her arms and held on, somehow. She prayed to God for help. One of her prayers was "Dear Lord, get me out of here. I don't want people to think that Aurelia was despondent and tried to commit suicide!" She managed, somehow, to pull herself out of that place. When I had my own cistern, put a concrete lid on it.

When my Mom and Dad were going to get married, old Mr. Thompson [*his portrait is in a frame above his bed*] didn't like the idea. They lived in a very nice house (still in existence) on Carrico Road. He said, "That Louie Wehmer is going to take my daughter over on that hill in a log cabin and starve her to death." It didn't turn out that way. They were determined to make a go of it and they did.

My Dad went to the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, and bought an Avery steam engine Threshing Machine. We would go from farm to farm during the threshing season and have a party. Can you imagine what that would be worth now?

July 12, 2007, Florissant, Missouri

Documented by Olga Smith

