**OPHELIA AND PRESS NEWBY**

When I was extremely young, I referred to Ophelia and Press Newby as the people with funny names. My Dad and I would visit them on occasion, sometimes with my older sister Mary-Margaret who was a year and a third younger than I. We always brought them ice cream. They were old people who lived in a little house, which, as the years went by, I realized was located six miles north of Gaston, Indiana, on a gravel road.

My Dad would sit and talk with them about grown-up things, and I would go outside and feed the nanny goat. The grass in her little pen was always cropped clear down to the roots, and I would go across the road and pull up grass for her from the side ditch. She always ate it eagerly.

When I got older, I learned that the visits were for their birthdays, which were one day apart, August 1 and 2. My dad would go to Collins Supermarket in Gaston on the way to their house and buy a half gallon of Neapolitan ice cream (vanilla, strawberry, and chocolate). He would take it in and place it in the freezer part of the refrigerator. I got so I would do that, and I always noticed they had no food or anything in the freezer part. I always wanted to open the rest of the refrigerator but I couldn’t because their house was just one big room (kitchen and living room). They apparently had a bedroom toward the back, but the door was always closed.

They had a black 1936 Chevrolet parked in a shed at the end of their short driveway. I would peer in each August to check the mileage, which if I remember was about 40,000 miles. That was the late 1940s and early 1950s. I kept track of their mileage on a piece of paper I hid under a board on a ledge in the shed. As I recall, they only put on approximately 2,000 miles a year on their six-mile trips to Gaston and perhaps occasional treks to Muncie 16 miles away via Wheeling Pike.

Then I learned that the reason my Dad always visited them on one of their birthdays was because he had rented a room from them on McKinley Avenue in Muncie when he was a student at Ball State Normal School (now Ball State University). My Dad was the first in his family to go to college. His Dad, Orton Wheeler, made him take the eighth grade over instead of allowing him to go on to high school. My grandfather Orton wanted my Dad to help out on their 80-acre farm. After repeating the eighth grade, my Dad was permitted to attend high school and then college. My Grandfather’s father, my Great Grandfather, was a medical doctor until he retired to become a farmer at age 45. Orton Wheeler had always been a farmer.

Apparently my Dad was so happy with his living arrangements in college that he established and later maintained friendship with the Newbys who rented him a room just three blocks from campus. That would be from 1919 to 1922, when he graduated to be a high school teacher.

As I grew older, I tended to listen to more of their conversations. They talked a lot about the old days, the factory where Press worked that made automobile batteries, Delco Remy. They vividly recalled the Great Depression, 1929 and into the 1930s. When Ophelia said or heard something that ticked her, she would clap her hands. When she reported or heard bad news, she would place her hands against her cheeks with her thumbs against her ears. Press did most of the talking. They never expressed much interest in me or my sister, if she were there.

One of the main things my Dad did was read letters to them because they could not read. The letters were from their daughter in Switzerland. She couldn’t call because they had no phone. So my dad would read the letters aloud to them. Sometimes they wanted them read, or part of them read, more than once. Ophelia would clap her hands or cheeks as the news called for. Sometimes there would be six or seven letters to be read. They paid a neighbor boy to read the letters to them when they first came, but they always wanted my dad to read them again. Sometimes, I was allowed to read one or two of them. We learned quite a lot about their daughter and her family.

The visits soon became a ritual with predictably repetitious experiences.

Then, just a few days before Christmas, my Dad said he should go check on the Newbys. By now the Newbys must have been in their eighties. I recall I was 15. It was 1953. The weather had been unusually cold and I think about 10 inches of snow was on the ground. The main roads were cleared of snow but not all of the side roads.

Even though it was bitter cold and even though it was not their birthdays, my Dad dutifully stopped at Collins Supermarket in Gaston and bought a half gallon of Neapolitan ice cream. Their gravel road had been cleared but their driveway was filled with snow and displayed no car tracks. As we approached the little house in our galoshes, I shouted, “The nanny goat is dead,” as she was lying mostly covered in snow.

My Dad opened the door and we walked into the house, as the door had no lock. We saw no one. My Dad went to the bedroom, a room where we had never been. They were in bed on their backs with blankets up to their chins. My Dad touched Press’s forehead and then Ophelia’s. “They’re dead,” he said. He pulled down the blankets on Press, and we saw his skinny arms lying at his side.

We drove back to Gaston and straight to the Gaston deputy’s house. (He was the only police official in this small town.) We reported the deaths. My Dad told the deputy, “It looks like they starved to death because the house is still warm. They just went to bed to die,”

On the way home on that Christmas season, my dad threw the ice cream out the car window, saying “We can’t eat their ice cream.”

Not all Christmases are merry.