

GRANDFATHER WILLIAM DEMERS, JR.

Grandfather Will was a stern looking man who often was noted for his glaring scowls and eyes. Don't be fooled by looks. He was truly kind, gentle and yet, unforgiving. His children (most of them) were a great disappointment to him because they drank, wasted their wonderful talents, and broke his heart. He blames his wife (Mary DeLisle) for that. Her family, who lived nearby, were great "tipplers" (both men and women) while Gramps did not drink. She covered up for the boys and hid them away in the attic when they were drinking. Consequently, Gramps seldom slept in his own (hand built) home, preferring to sleep at the Pump House (Water Dept) where he was the Superintendent. He was a Mechanical Engineer. He also would go up the hill to his "shop" and hide out.

My father lived right next door so we were often in Gramps shop - visiting. With us he was kindness itself. There was a big wood stove in the shop (which was over the garage) and huge oak benches and cabinets he made. His rocking chair was by the stove and he'd sit there and smoke his pipe while he taught us to make whistles and doodads out of pine scraps. In those huge oak drawers under the benches he had a "secret" cache of candy. Not just a bar or two. He bought them by the gross. Mostly his favorite - Milky Ways - but also Tar Babies (licorice), Root Beer Barrel lollipops, Cream filled Choc. Puffs, etc. He had a terrible sweet tooth - but was true to his promise not to "spoil our teeth" - so we got ONE CHOICE only. It was SO hard to decide. Ha! Sometimes he took me on his lap and sang "My Sweet Little Alice Blue Gown". His hands were calloused and hard from work - but oh! so gentle with me. He had beautiful white hair and mustache - though he was only in his 60's. He was "old" long before his time because he had hardly ever been a "child". He was apprenticed at 12 to learn carpentry and worked a full 8 hr. day. Fortunately, for him, the man he worked for had a tutor for his son - and allowed Will to learn alongside his son. Will CRAVED EDUCATION and persued it diligently. When he had saved up enough money he went to an Academy (like a High School) and later on got his engineering degree from Penn. Does any of this sound like your relatives?

Gramps was responsible for designing and building the new water system in Saranac Lake. It drew water from McKenzie Pond and piped it up to two huge reservoirs on top of the mountain behind the Demers houses on Riverside Drive. Then by gravity it fed to the Water Dept. Bldg. by Lake Flower. My father, who got a degree in Accounting, was never happy in an office and soon he chose to join his Father at the Water Dept. - constructing the new system. When Gramps died tragically (1935) at only 65, my Dad became the Superintendent, most reluctantly.

Gramps had been ill, off and on, for sometime, I guess, but when we was sick he'd lock himself in his shop and allow no one to enter. I can only surmise, now that I look back on it (because I was only 7 or 8 at the time) that he may have had migraine headaches or something like that. Anyway he had been ill with pneumonia that last Winter and my Dad worried

a lot about him. As Spring approached Gramps spent more and more time at the Pump House and barely went home for meals or a bath and change of clothes. He told no one what was wrong.

One evening before sun down, my Uncle Bob Bouck (Marie's second husband) asked me to walk to town with him to get ice cream. On our way back we stopped at the Pump House to say Hello to Gramps. He was a long time answering the door and wouldn't let us in. Said he was O.K. but he looked awful. Bob tried to enter but Gramps shut and locked the door. We went home, reluctantly. The next morning his body was found floating in the mill race and the media screamed "MURDER". They arrested Dad and his brothers and took them in for questioning. My Dad nearly had a nervous breakdown. He had loved his Dad and to even be under suspicion drove him to illness. Albert, Russell, Frank - they were all suspects.

It turned out that Gramps - right after he closed the door on us - had a cerebral hemorrhage and was BLINDED by it. He had staggered through the giant pump area - hitting his head and bleeding all over the floor. He fell down the stairs into the lower pump room and groped blindly for the door. He fell through the mill race door and into the river as it ran below the building. That is where they found him next day.

It wasn't until the autopsy confirmed that he'd had the hemorrhage, that they let the sons go. He also had spinal meningitis, pneumonia in both lungs, severe heart disease and a strangulated hernia. My Lord, how did he survive so long and never telling anyone or seeking help? There are no answers to that. It was many years after that before my Dad could deal with it.

The entire town closed down for the funeral. He was loved and remembered by everyone and his generosity NEVER forgotten. In my eyes he was the sweet, gentle man of my childhood and only NOW do I fully understand and appreciate him. My Father was SO like him in so many ways. Perhaps yours was too.

If this is not the kind of "reminiscence" you care to receive - don't hesitate to say so. However, there is no way to have the wonderful insights into our past without truth as well. No ones life is all good and some of the bad is what makes a person who they are, for better or worse. It is history.

Alice Demers O'Hare
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