

Leclaire Memories

Another Season

by Rusty Hughes (2001)

Note: In this story from January, 2001 Rusty tells of growing up in Leclaire in the 1970s and his memories of the Wheat family who lived at 746 Hale Avenue.

Another Season

Looking out at the snow and ice, I remember things and people from childhood, events that happened more than 30 years ago. I know, some family members probably have socks older than that. However, from my vantage point, it was a different era, a separate lifetime. Although it exists only in memories now, that time had a tangential, tactile quality, one that cannot be replicated in this era of PCs and digital everything.

Margaret and Raymond Wheat were surrogate grandparents to a generation of kids who grew up on our little block in the Leclaire neighborhood of Edwardsville, Illinois. Their house was small – I remember four rooms plus a small attic, clapboard siding, a coal-fired furnace, a hand pump at the kitchen sink, nothing too special – but it had a covered front porch at road-level with a wooden porch swing. Two towering hardwoods (one elm and one oak, I believe) shaded the front porch, as well as much of the house. If you saw the movie *To Kill a Mockingbird*, this house could have been in the

background along the street where Atticus Finch lived. From their favorite spot on the front porch swing, Grandma and Grandpa Wheat, as everyone called them, reached out like living bridges from a time long gone.

Late spring days, certainly summer days, and often fall days would find the Wheats almost always on that swing, from early morning to sometimes after dusk. It was nearly impossible to pass by their house (just two doors down from our house) without being summoned onto the porch. With Grandpa Wheat, it was always a gruff “Hey kid, come here!” Of course, Grandma Wheat was more kind, usually a gentle “good morning” or “How’s your mother?” or “Say, I’ve got something for you, ” after which she generally went to her kitchen for something she had just baked or canned – usually homemade pumpkin bread or apple butter. She always laughed at the gruffness her husband would put on for us. Grandpa Wheat usually wanted to show us how something worked, like a butter churn, or have us sit and do some activity with him, like whittling sticks or cleaning snap beans. When I say us, I mean Rich and me. (Robin was just an infant then.) Grandpa Wheat didn’t talk a lot, but when he did, it was usually something about politics and the government, and he never reigned in his colorful words just because we were kids. Most of what he said was beyond our comprehension, but it was

he who first explained what the initials “WPA” meant that were stamped into some sidewalks in the neighborhood.

The Wheat’s had lived in the neighborhood for many years before we moved there in 1966. Their kids were our parents’ age and older. Grandma Wheat often told stories about her boys and their love of the baseball diamond (which we shared), particular plays they had made, how they had nailed peach baskets to old trees for basketball games there, etc. (Later, when I got to high school, I saw pictures of her son Leroy in the trophy case – he had pitched several seasons for the Cleveland Indians.) In the summer, when Wheats from all over the Midwest would gather at the homestead for family reunions, Grandma Wheat always invited us for homemade ice cream, but we had to take our turn at the cranking –I remember the sweetness of the ice cream and a dull ache in my arms.

Particularly vivid images come to mind from those times with the Wheats – the taste of wild black cherries from a tree in their yard – Grandma Wheat’s soft voice scolding a squirrel stealing fruit from another tree, a paw-paw, out back – the shocking red stalks of ripe rhubarb growing along their fence near the alley. On summer evenings, when lightning bugs would punctuate the

twilight, we neighborhood kids always tried to sneak in one last inning of wiffle ball in the Wheats' side yard. That's when the callings usually started, those long, beckoning yells of parents calling kids home before dark. The calls were as familiar to us then as cricket songs, or the low wail of trains passing through town in the night.

There were quilting parties sometimes in the fall. Grandma and Grandpa would clear furniture from the middle room, where Grandpa Wheat had portraits and photographs of former presidents hanging on the walls, and they would set up a quilting frame. I can still see the barely tolerant faces of old women -- friends and relatives of Grandma Wheat -- watching as they let us get close to the frame to see what they were doing. They held threaded needles and thimbles at the ready, with a reserve of straight pins in their pursed lips. We were always on our best behavior.

Grandpa Wheat died when I was 10 or 11. It was a sad time. The night of the visitation, mom said she noticed their porch swing rocking gently when she was coming up the front steps, even though there was no wind. She thought it was Grandpa Wheat's way of saying good-bye. I don't remember if it was that same night or the next night, but I went to look for myself. Their house

was the darkest I had ever seen it. I wanted to believe that swing was moving, but it was mostly still.

Grandma Wheat was sad for a time after he passed, but she was still sweet to us. We were getting a little older, and she came to rely on us sometimes. We cut grass for her in the summer and shoveled the walks for her in the winter. I remember burning a stump in her front yard after one of her large shade trees had to be removed, using coal from her cellar to burn out the roots. She always paid us for the work we did – \$2.00 and a loaf of pumpkin bread for cutting the grass once. (The bread alone would have been fine.) What she liked most then was when we would visit with her on the porch swing. I seem to remember Robin becoming her favorite, at some point (She was 4 or 5 by then – maybe even 6).

Junior high rolled around. I was between 12 and 13, in the seventh grade. In the spring, after track practice, I almost always walked past Grandma Wheat's house on the way home. Rich was still at Leclaire School, so I walked alone, then. Grandma would often be in her swing on the porch, also alone. I would sit with her sometimes, tell her about practice or school, listen to a few stories.

On one cool afternoon when I stopped to visit, Grandma Wheat was very sad, tears welling in her eyes. She had been thinking about Grandpa. She needed to tell the details of his medical condition as it was near the end of his life – I listened. After several minutes, she came to grandpa’s last night at home, telling how he had walked slowly around the parlor, pausing at the pictures of the presidents, talking to some... I felt very young as she talked, too young to be of much comfort. She grew tired, and so we swung slowly, not speaking, the sound of her shoe scraping the old wooden planks of the porch when we moved forward, a creaking sound punctuating the back swing.

In late spring, I overheard Mom talking to someone about Grandma Wheat’s breast cancer.

I could not bear to talk much to her after that. I avoided the swing. We exchanged pleasantries but little more when I passed by, after school. She smiled a lot then, like she could read my mind. It was a kind smile.

That summer, she left us, and there was an auction. I remember tables of quilts and carnival glass, a wringer washer – lots of tools. Dad gave me money to buy something, noting that I should get a couple of shovels if I could. I found, instead, a basketful of playing cards, pens and pencils. There was a small bidding war (a woman in the crowd wanted it for her daughter), and I spent almost all of Dad's money on that basket. He forgave me, eventually, but I don't think he ever understood it. The stuff was priceless to me – she had touched everything.

The Wheat house was vacant through that fall. When winter's first heavy snow came, Rich and I shoveled the sidewalk in front of our house before sweeping through several blocks of houses, door-to-door, picking up shoveling jobs along the way. After we were satisfied with the money we made, we headed back home. As we were going up the front steps, I looked at the Wheat house a couple of doors down. There was smoke coming from the chimney – someone had fired the furnace to keep the water lines from freezing – but the place still looked very cold.

I walked down to the Wheat house – shoveled the front walk and then the back walk. Lastly, I swept off the shallow stoop that served as a step onto

the porch and sat to rest for a minute. I looked at the swing, which was lightly dusted with snow. It did not move.

It wasn't too long before Dad came down the sidewalk to see what I was doing. I can still see the unasked question on his face as I sat there on the stoop, trying not to cry.

Grandma would have smiled.

MEMORIES FROM 1206 EMERSON AVENUE

By Henrietta Johnson (2005)

First, let me introduce my family, the Johnsons. There were five of us: my parents, Henry and Clara; my sisters, Donna and Edith; and myself, Henrietta. (photo)

My family moved to Edwardsville and our house at 1206 Emerson Street in 1945. It must have been at the end of WW II because we no longer heard the air raid sirens that sent us scurrying under the dining room table as we did in Clinton, IL, before we moved. Our house was built around 1927 and my parents purchased the house for around \$2,000 (a lot of money back then). By today's standards our house was small--only 900 square feet (but that was average size in those days). My two sisters and I slept together in one bedroom because houses only had 2 bedrooms then—one for mom and dad and the other for the kids, regardless of how many there were. And closets were virtually non-existent; but then, we never had many clothes either. My dad was a ticket agent for the Illinois Terminal Railroad, a job that made him exempt from the armed forces as the railroads were the most important means of transportation at that time. I remember the train whistling as it went by our back yard and to this day I miss that sound. The passenger trains stopped running in 1956.

I attended the third grade at the old LeClaire School, which is now the Children's Museum. I remember the warm summer evenings when all the neighborhood kids played kick the tin can in the middle of Emerson Street, which ended at Hadley, so no cars went by. Also, being so close to LeClaire Lake meant swimming every day in the summer. I still recall the sticky muddy bottom that my feet sank into.

Fall and the cooler weather meant putting on storm windows to protect the house from the elements and give insulation from the cold. There was no double pane glass or triple track windows back then; just a single sheet of glass protected you from the cold. Installing the windows meant getting out a ladder, carrying a heavy wooden framed glass storm window up it, and attaching it to two hooks at the top of each window. I recall some of our neighbors were elderly or widows and my dad carried his ladder around the neighborhood putting up their storm windows. Of course, in the spring this whole process was reversed, and the storm windows were taken down and stored for the summer and screens were then installed over the windows.

In the winter we all ice skated on Leclaire Lake and I always envied my dad for his ability to skate backwards (a feat I never mastered). Our snowsuits were wool and hot and sticky. I remember one winter the ice was thin (no one ever formally tested the ice, we did that by walking out on it). I was skating and we had a bonfire burning which must have heated up the ice. In no time I broke through the ice and fortunately the water was only a couple of feet deep at that point. I still recall how wet and COLD I was by the time I arrived home. And of course, winter signaled snow. I can't forget the cedar tree we had in our back yard. It was tall (probably 15 ft.) and thin. At the first covering of snow it bent down to kiss the ground (photo) but as soon as the snow melted it up righted itself again. I was always amazed that it didn't break in half.

I remember being confused as to whether I lived in Leclaire or Edwardsville; the concept of a separate area in town just wasn't clear to my young mind. The end of Emerson Street signaled the end of town because that is where the corn and wheat fields began (where Montclair Shopping center is today). We used to climb over the fence and run through the fields. I remember eating the kernels of wheat which was a wonderful snack for us back then. And after the corn was harvested I remember bringing home the ears that were left behind, shucking them, and smashing the kernels with a hammer so the birds would have winter feed.

Our neighbors, the Spornols, used to raise chickens; that was what everyone did who couldn't afford or didn't want store bought chickens. I remember how mad my mom would get when they would perch on her freshly washed clothes on the clothesline. I also remember Albert Spornol, who worked as a teller at the Bank of Edwardsville, butchering the chickens in his back yard by chopping their heads off. I can still, in my mind's eye, see them flopping around (there was no PETA back then). My neighbor boy, David Dominoski, somehow managed to get the chickens' feet from him and chased us all over the neighborhood because we were frightened of them. But we were lucky to have Dominoskis as neighbors as they were the only family in the neighborhood to have a phone. If anyone in the neighborhood got a call, Ora Dominoski walked over to get them. And making a call from their house was sometimes difficult because someone else might be talking on the party line.

I fondly remember the trapeze my father hung from a large tree by our back porch. It was constructed from two lengths of chain and a steel bar. As I would hang from it I used to pretend I was in the circus. How we girls avoided broken bones from falling off I'll never know.

My mother planted a tiny pine tree in the back yard one year and we girls watched it grow. Our children climbed to the top of it when they were small. The tree finally became so enormous that the power company had to trim it many times. Now it is a ghostly remains of its former glory.

I remember especially going to downtown Edwardsville on Friday nights. That was the night of the week that we three girls looked forward to because all of the stores were open late and EVERYONE in Edwardsville shopped downtown. Shupach's was the town's only shoe store, as I recall, and I remember stepping on the x-ray machine they had to see the bones in my foot (that is how they used to determine if a child's shoes were the right size). Also, there were Silverbloom's, Madison Store, and Woolworth's 5 & 10 cent store, where we could buy anything our hearts could desire. And if we had been good and my parents could afford it, we got an ice cream cone from the Candy Kitchen.

In those days eating out meant having a picnic because there were only a couple of restaurants (which most people couldn't afford) and no McDonald's or fast food back then. But when air conditioning was introduced everyone's life changed considerably. People started going to the Edwardsville Café to eat, but mainly to sit in the cool air for a while. Shortly after that the Lux and Wildey movie theaters became air conditioned and going to them was at extra treat. But at 1206 Emerson my mom said she would never have air conditioning because she liked to open the windows for the fresh air. But once we got an air window unit there was never an open window again at our house. At least then, in the miserably hot weather, we no longer had to sleep on the front porch to stay cool.

One day after one of our cats had a litter, I decided to count the number of cats we had. There were 25!! (my sisters can't believe that but I'm the oldest so what I say goes). And our cats roamed freely through the neighborhood as did the other neighbors' cats and dogs. There were no rules and regulations regarding animals back then and when they got sick you either nursed them back to health or they died. There were no veterinarians for small animals back in those days. My dad once said that we had so many

cat funerals that he was always afraid that while burying one he would dig up another cat that had previously been buried.

Other memories of mine run to our hand cranked Victrola phonograph in the basement that provided hours of entertainment. I remember my delight when I received an electric record player for Christmas one year. Our basement was one of a kind also because the floor undulated. My dad's theory was that the dirt was just leveled off when the basement was dug and the concrete was poured over it assuming it would turn out level. The hills and valleys in the floor varied about 4-5 inches which was great for three girls to roller skate on. We had Mom's fresh canned produce in the fruit cellar and coal in the coal bin. When stokers were first introduced and the coal was augured from a large bin into the furnace, the never ending job of hand firing the furnace was a thing of the past.

Of course, I couldn't forget our player piano in the dining room, which we called the "middle" room since it was in the middle of the house. And although they didn't complain, the hours of listening to the same piano rolls must have gotten on my folk's nerves just as the loud music, when my kids were young, annoyed me.

Learning to drive in those days was quite a challenge. We had no driving classes in school; that was something that parents were expected to teach their children. Our family had a Model-A Ford with a stick shift. My dad would take me out on the roads around Dunlap Lake (which was hardly populated then) and let me drive. I was terrified with the winding roads that I would end up driving into the lake but fortunately that never happened. Also, our car only had one seat and there were five of us. My father drove while my mom held Donna on her lap and I held Edith on mine. We would have been arrested today for our car packed with people. Also, there were no heaters in the cars; the only heat generated was from what was called a manifold heater which meant there was only the heat generated from the engine of the car. Talk about a cold ride in the winter.

I can still see my mom sweeping her porch every morning and my dad tending to his grape arbor (which is still there-photo), his roses, and his enormous vegetable garden. The garden was so large, in fact, that he gave most of the vegetables away either to the neighbors or by taking them downtown to the bank. Every year he would try to outdo the sunflowers he

planted the year before (this one is 14 ft. tall-photo). In the spring we would all drive out to the country to dig up wildflowers to plant in our yard.

Yes, life was good at 1206 Emerson--we had nothing but we had everything!

In 1993 my mother entered a nursing home and my father died. I finally, after my memories began to fade, sold the house to Daphne and Keith Mills in 1997, who in turn sold it this year to Chuck and Sarah Yaeger.

I hope the new owners have as wonderful a life as my family, the Johnsons, did at 1206 Emerson Street.