



Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries



July. 1923

*“The sweet things in life to you were just loaned,
So how can you lose what you’ve never owned?
Life is just a bowl of cherries.”*

That song was composed in 1931 at the start of the Great Depression, eight years after the events captured in the following story. It was sung over the years by a number of famous artists, including Judy Garland, Ethel Merman and Johnny Mathis, to name a few. The lyrics were intended to help people forget their troubles and get happy. They were meant to provide moments of silly fun amid the toil, in many ways, like the afternoon spent by the Claas Family on a sunny Sunday, eight years earlier in July 1923.

It is hard to imagine, but just seventy years before Tonie started writing her journals in 1907, the countryside that was to become the Fussville community and the Claas farm was an untamed woodland. It had been inhabited by the indigenous people, the Native Americans, the Menomonee Indians. In the intervening years, the wild land was tamed, settled and cultivated by a collection of European immigrants and their descendants. They brought order to the randomness. Farm fields and orchards and gardens were carved into the fertile land, land which had previously been covered with native trees and grass.

The summer of 1923 seemed to have had just the right combination of sunshine, timely and sufficient rain, warmth but not too warm and a spirit of community and helpfulness. The spring planting was completed and the transition from planting to cultivating, then to harvest was underway. Much of the

first cutting of hay was in the barn. But then, the harvest turned to the orchard. Not to the apples, but to the cherries.



The cherry trees in the Claas orchard were planted by Harry’s father, in the early years of the twentieth century. It usually took about five years after they were planted before they began to bear fruit. Cherry trees had a short life span, between 15 and 30 years.

And it wasn't until each tree had fully matured (about ten years) that it produced at its maximum, anywhere from 30 to 50 quarts of cherries in a season.

These cherries were the earliest tree fruit to ripen. And once the fruit had ripened, there was a short window during which the fruit had to be picked from the trees. When cherry picking commenced, once again, it was all hands on deck.

These bandits were caught "red-handed," as they pilfered some of those red cherries. They were surely not part of Harry's plan for the harvest in 1920.

Needless to say, because of their diminutive stature, the bandits were only able to grab the lowest hanging fruit. But unfortunately for them, the cherries were not quite ripe. They were indeed red in color but the fruit was still firm and not very sweet. Their punishment fit the crime ... they had to wash their hands and promise to let the cherries ripen. And hopefully, no one would get a stomachache for having eaten not quite ripe cherries. But just three years later, those bandits would take part in the cherry picking crew. Those past misdeeds were forgotten.



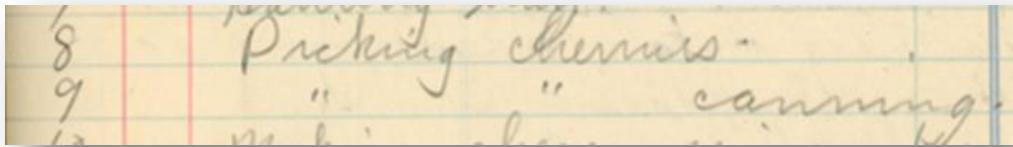
In the summer of 1923, the cherries hit their peak, ripening all at the same time in early July. It was during the middle of the haying season. So, while getting the hay crop in the barn was important, it was suspended briefly. The very short cherry harvest took precedence. The cherry harvest had to be completed quickly, otherwise the cardinals, robins, wrens and other wild birds winging their way through the countryside would drop in for a snack. Those red cherries made for an easy target to spot.

Those birds were a pleasant and colorful nuisance. But there were other, more destructive threats waiting to swoop in. Flocks of sparrows were flying through the countryside looking for a meal. Once the word spread among them that ripening cherries were there for the taking, there was no stopping them. If left at it, in no time, they could strip a tree bare of fruit. And if those sparrows weren't enough of a nuisance, squirrels and raccoons found that cherries brought some balance to their diets. So once the cherries were ripe, there was no time to be wasted.

July 8 was a Sunday. Normally, Sundays were days of rest and family gatherings when Harry and Tonie and the family refrained from any farm work other than the necessary daily chores. But they were faced with a decision. Should they "keep holy the Lord's day" or pick those ripe cherries?

Harry did what any good Catholic farmer would do. He called the priest at St. Anthony to ask for a dispensation. Harry knew that if Father didn't give that dispensation and they went ahead with the cherry harvest, his family would be the talk of Fussville. It wouldn't reach the level of a scandal, but people would still talk.

As it turned out, it was only a short conversation. The priest assured Harry that God would approve of picking cherries on Sunday, just so long as a few were left for the wild birds. It would be a small price to pay. So, the whole Claas Family changed into their cherry-picking clothes. Harry grabbed some boxes and the step ladder. He hitched the horses to the wagon, the children hopped aboard for the short ride and everyone headed to the orchard.

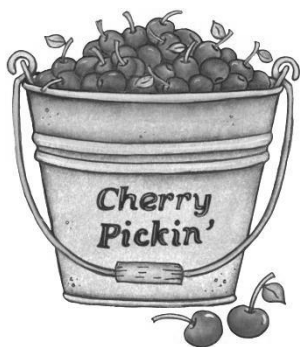


July 8, 1923 - "Picking cherries."

July 9, 1923 - "Picking cherries canning."

Harry positioned the wagon under the canopy of the cherry trees. Then he set up the large stepladder. The children were squabbling over who might grab a spot on one of the rungs. Tona was the quickest, beating her older brothers as she climbed to the top. There she balanced her body, not thinking of the potential consequences of a fall. As a plucky eight-year-old, she never gave that a thought. Once Harry restored order, everyone was assigned a spot and got busy, picking the bright red fruit. It was a warm and sunny day. There weren't many jobs on the farm where everyone could join in. But this was surely one of them, filled with lots of smiles and laughter.

Some of the low-hanging fruit was retrievable just standing on the ground or the wagon. But most of it was located on the higher branches. Those trees stood about 15 to 20 feet high. Harry had carefully pruned these trees last winter. Pruning helped to make them more fruitful. It also made it easier to access the ripe fruit by controlling the height of the trees.



Picking the cherries was done methodically. The trees were stripped of their fruit in an orderly manner. There were different ways used by the pickers to gain access to the cherries. The easiest way was to reach the lowest hanging fruit while standing on the ground. That's why it was called "low-hanging fruit." Then, there was fruit gathered while the picker was standing on the wagon. There wasn't much risk there either.

Until Harry needed it to reach the higher branches, the girls manned the ladder. They were adventurous, climbing up to the highest rungs, oblivious to the danger. It always seemed that the best, most abundant stash of cherries was always growing just beyond their reach. They learned quickly (and thankfully without incident) that it might be best to let their father take control of the ladder. Harry wasn't a tall man, but he did have the benefit of a couple of feet in height. Plus, he had the wisdom of almost 38 years. There was no sense in taking unnecessary risks.

And then there was the method used by the boys, Sylvester and Roman. They were undaunted by the possible danger that loomed from simply climbing up the sturdy tree branches. They could see the fruit that always seemed another branch away, just beyond their reach. So, they kept climbing until Tonie told them to stop. Mothers were always like that.

After each tree was picked, Harry did some spot checking to make sure that most of the cherries had been picked. He found that some had been missed but he was okay if those were left for the birds. That was part of the deal with the priest. Then, he repositioned the wagon under the next tree.

The company was good, the camaraderie was great, the cherries were tart but flavorful, and the cherry crates were overflowing. When no one was looking, the boys chose to playfully toss a cherry in the direction of unsuspecting targets, usually each other. A few misspent cherries weren't going to be missed anyway. There were thousands of them hanging from the branches.

The family stopped long enough to pose for this cherished, classic photo. The expressions on the faces of everyone gathered under the cherry trees seem to reflect that indeed, life was just a bowl of cherries.



Pictured from left to right are Tonie (smiling, grasping a cherry branch), the ladder crew of Rosie (with a firm grip on her box, looking seriously into the camera), Tona (seated at the top of the ladder, oblivious to the fact that she was eight feet above the ground below), Cyla (ready, just in case she needed to catch her older sister) and Roman (looking like he was getting ready to lob a cherry at his brother). And then there was the wagon crew of Annie, the new wife of Tonie's brother Frank (the photographer for this picture), Sylvester (who was either sneaking a bite of a cherry or getting ready to throw one at his brother) and Harry, the man in charge.



Annie Szatkowski was the newest addition to the family. Frank and Annie had met just a few years earlier while he was serving in the Army in post-Great War Germany. From their home in nearby Waukesha, they were frequent visitors to the farm and usually pitched in on whatever the task of the day happened to be. This day's task was cherry picking.

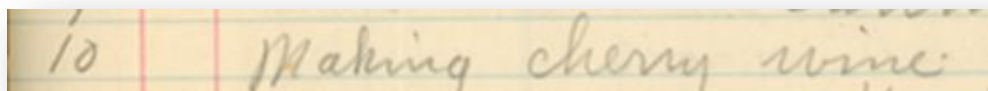
The sun was shining brightly that day. All the guys were sporting headgear; Roman in his bucket hat, Harry and Sylvester in their "newsies" or newsboy caps. Tonie and Annie were wearing handmade bonnets or "schutes" as Tonie called them. While Rosie wore a sleep cap, Tona and Cyla were working on their tans and chose to go uncovered. Actually, once everyone started working around the trees, they were just as likely to have their hats knocked off of their heads by wayward branches. So maybe the young girls were just smarter than everyone else.

Just over Harry's left shoulder, Doll and Brinnie are seen grazing in the hay field. They got to spend a lazy summer afternoon, resting, relaxing and enjoying themselves as they nibbled away on some of the grass left behind by the hay loader.

On the distant horizon stood the faded silhouette of the steeple of St. Anthony Church. Whether Frank, the photographer, had chosen to include that distant image or whether it was just coincidental, no one knows for sure. But that church was central to the faith lives of the Claas Family. So it seems appropriate that St. Anthony was in the picture watching over the family.

The harvest on this day was plentiful indeed. Each of the trees produced about 25 quarts of fruit. The family was able to strip the fruit from four of the six trees in the orchard. Picking would continue on Monday, the following day. All told, about 150 quarts of cherries were harvested, enough to replenish Tonie's cellar with canned cherries for the winter, not to mention the cherry wine that would restock a part of the wine cellar.

In 1923, the United States was in the third year of its experiment with "Prohibition." Today, it seems almost improbable that the 18th Amendment to the Constitution was actually ratified by an overwhelming majority of the nation. It prohibited the production, importation, transportation and sale of alcoholic beverages. But drug stores were allowed to sell alcohol for medicinal purposes. And anyone could make their own beer or wine at home, as much as 100 gallons per adult, for personal consumption. That was a lot of wine.



July 10, 1923 - "Making cherry wine."

Wine making was a cherished family tradition. Over the years, Tonie wrote frequently about how they were able to produce wine from the fruit of the land including grapes, apples, plums, rhubarb and even dandelions. But this was cherry season and so, it was time for Harry to make cherry wine. The trees didn't produce enough cherries to even come close to filling his quota of 100 gallons of wine (or even 200 gallons, if you count another 100 gallons for Tonie's quota). He did eventually manage to meet (or probably exceed) his quota by dabbling in the art of beermaking. But that's another story.

Harry's cherry wine recipe was not complicated. It included sugar, water, some lemon juice, yeast, starch, some grape leaves and the liquid juice from lots of freshly picked and crushed cherries. Harry placed the mixture in a large crock, covered and sealed it, and allowed the concoction to ferment in the cellar for the next month.

After a couple checks and taste tests, Harry poured off the sweet product, enough to fill about a dozen quart jars. They were stored in the cool cellar and left to age for a few more weeks. Then they would finally be ready to be served for special occasions.



It was only appropriate that Harry delivered the first two jars to the priest at St. Anthony, in gratitude for the dispensation he had granted two months back. Had the cherry picking been delayed, who knows how many of those tasty cherries would have been gobbled up by those pesky birds or varmints?

The wine was sweet, yet tart and delicious, a great complement to any main course or dessert. Once a jar was opened, it had to be consumed within a few days, but that was hardly a problem for any of Tonie's Sunday dinner guests.

And perhaps one of the benefits of cherry wine (aside from the obvious) was the commonly held notion that it was "good for your heart." Indeed, a good and healthy life was just a bowl of cherries. Or maybe a glass of cherry wine. Who would argue with that?

*"The sweet things in life to you were just loaned,
So how can you lose what you've never owned?
Life is just a bowl of cherries,
So live and laugh at it all!"*

