

LIFE IN THE LOG CABIN by Wes Hummel



2011

Innsbrook, a community located south of Wright City, Missouri, is rehabbing an old log house on their property. It is well over a hundred and fifty years old. Everyone in Innsbrook refers to it simply as “the log cabin.”

The last family to live in this humble abode was the George Hummel family. They moved in sometime in 1932 and moved out in the summer of 1945. These were the years of the Great Depression and World War II. Both events greatly influenced life in the log cabin.

My name is Wes Hummel. I am the youngest member of the Hummel family. I was born in this log structure in 1935 and we moved away in 1945. So I am able to relate a few events from my own memory and experience. But much comes from what I have been told by other

members of my family. In spite of my effort to be totally accurate, one must allow for the possible embellishments of twice told tales.

The economy was beef cattle farming. And since the size of the herd was, at most, thirty-five head, it was a meager economy.

The fields used for crops ran north and south alongside the small creek which now creates Aspen Lake. One field was planted in corn and the other four in hay. The cattle grazed in the fields along Charette Creek to the east. The remainder of the 400 acre farm was all hilly woods.

A few brown colored chickens had free range and supplied us with eggs and an occasional chicken dinner. We threw some shelled corn out to them each day. We raised a few pigs for our own meat consumption. They needed to be "slopped" each day. Two of the beef cows that gave the most amount of milk supplied what we needed for our daily consumption of milk and butter.

When we left in 1945 there was still no electricity running to the cabin. Most families in America acquired their first refrigerator, radio, electric washing machine and vacuum sweeper in the 1920s. The acquisition of these conveniences by most Americans is the original meaning of the term, "roaring twenties," not the cynicism of people like F. Scott Fitzgerald. But you can see that life in the log cabin was at least two decades behind normality.

All the farming was done with a team of horses. Fritz, a gentle roan colored horse, and Dusty, a somewhat obstinate white horse.

George Hummel, age 33 and his wife, Elsie, age 24, with their one year old daughter, Geraldine, moved into the house in 1932. Phyllis Hummel was born in the cabin in January of 1933. Two years later, in March of 1935, Wesley, your humble author, was the last person to be born in this sturdy, but humble edifice.

George kept a diary. Each day's laconic entry would include the weather and what tasks he performed or what field he worked in that day.

On the day of my birth his diary entry was something like, “Cold and clear. Repaired fences. A boy was born today.”

Doc Dyer drove his buggy the seven miles from Warrenton in order to assist in the delivery. The last two miles to the house was not passable by car. He was summoned by our most modern convenience, the crank telephone which was fastened to the wall in the hall, to the left of the kitchen door. The mouthpiece was fixed, but the earpiece had a two foot cord. We were on a party line. We knew the call was for us when it rang two longs and a short.

On a Sunday morning, in the summer of 1935, the Hummel family loaded themselves into the buggy and headed for church. It was time to have Wesley baptized. As the buggy started the rough ride through a creek crossing, Elsie told four year old Geraldine to watch her two year old sister, Phyllis. The buggy lurched, Phyllis fell out, and the buggy wheel ran over her arm. Luckily, Phyllis was not injured at all. Perhaps her tiny arm landed between two larger rocks. Gerry remembers the event to this day. She felt a deep guilt for failing in her job.



George and Elsie



Phyllis and Gerry 1935

When I was almost three, August Beckemeyer was hauling a wagon of logs. He stopped by the cabin and came in for a bite. I was able to climb up on the wagon and sat up front on the end of a log. I grabbed the reins and said, "Gitti up," several times before the horses began moving forward downhill. August came running out of the house and was able to stop them before they had gone a hundred feet. My story was, "I gitty uped dem and dey goed, but I woed dem and I woed dem, but dey wouldn't top."

One Sunday morning the family was getting ready to go to church. My sister, Phyllis, dressed herself that morning. She came out wearing her mother's large brimmed hat and high heeled shoes and announced, "I am ready to go!" Except for the two items, she was stark naked.

Our closest neighbors were the Niesendierk family. They lived about a half mile south across Charette Creek. Each family had a loud bell they rang to signal when they wanted to talk. They would then yell their message. Both families were blessed with strong lungs.

One problem George and Elsie had with the Niesendierks was that they borrowed tools and took a long time to return them. There is little doubt that George and Elsie discussed this problem in front of little Geraldine. On one occasion when one of the Niesendierks was at the Hummel's, little Geraldine repeated some of the complaints she had heard her parents discuss. All of the borrowed tools were soon returned.

The only thing George Hummel ever wanted to be was a farmer. He did not mind the hard work, lack of amenities or isolated existence. Elsie didn't mind hard work either. But the isolation and lack of amenities later showed up as an issue. But with all of their hard work and making due with very little, they could not make a go of it.

From 1938 to 1942 George worked as a carpenter, the first year in Warrenton and then in Overland, Missouri.

The family was gone from the log cabin for four years. But George returned often to care for the two horses and the small remaining herd of

cows. There were people who helped him look after things when he couldn't be there.

For one year, in 1942, George moved back to the cabin by himself and farmed. Elsie stayed in Overland with the three children and worked at Curtiss Wright, helping build airplanes for World War II.

As soon as school was out in the summer of 1943, the children were moved to the log cabin to join their father. Elsie worked five days a week and joined her family on weekends. Those last two years at the log cabin were from 1943 to 1945, and I grew from age 8 to age 10. Much of this time I still remember.



George, Gerry, Phyllis, and Wes 1944

By the summer of 1943, we were all old enough to do chores and there were plenty of chores to do.

THE CHORES

Much time was spent in the summer putting up hay. Dad would cut it with a horse drawn mower. He would rake it into wind rows with a horse drawn rake. Then it was our turn to start helping as we each took a pitch fork and piled the hay into shocks. Next, the horses were hitched to a hay

wagon and the shocks of hay were piled onto the wagon. It was my job to “tramp down” the hay while the other three pitched it on the wagon. The first part of the summer we filled the hay loft with hay. By the end of the summer with the hay loft full, we made haystacks out in the field. In summer we hoed weeds out of the cornfield.

My two sisters and I were in school when Dad picked the corn. But it was our job to shell the corn, which we did a little at a time. A corn shelling device was attached to a wooden box about three feet long and two feet wide. We took turns turning the crank on the outside of the box. This turned a disc on the inside of the box which had short spikes which tore the kernels off the cob as the ear was pushed into the top opening.

Phyllis became the most adept at milking cows, so that became her job. Each morning, Phyllis milked one cow while Dad milked the other. My two sisters did the cooking, but I think it was mainly Gerry.

It was my job to scatter corn to the chickens and gather eggs. I remember occasionally splitting regular firewood into small kindling for starting the fire in the kitchen stove. Dad created a large pile of split firewood not far from the cabin. It was our job to fill the box behind the cook stove with firewood.

When we ran low on butter we churned cream into butter. We had a cream separator with a hand crank to make the milk spin in the metal bowl. The centrifugal force separated the cream from the milk. In those days skim milk was not considered fit for human consumption and was fed to the hogs.

There were rare times our well ran dry of water. We carried our pails about a half mile north to a spring on the east side of the valley and carried home the good water. The horses and cows had watering holes in the creek where they could drink, but not the pigs. Dad hitched the horses up to a “sled” with a 55 gallon barrel on it. He hauled water from the creek to the pigs.

Another chore was turning the handle of the large grinding stone to sharpen the cycle of the horse drawn mower.

LIVING DANGEROUSLY

We were surprised when the horse drawn mower killed a diamond back rattlesnake. This happened in the southern most field close to Charette Creek. We didn't know there were rattlesnakes in this part of Missouri. By the way, there were no deer or wild turkey in this part of Missouri by 1945.

One day I was headed for the outdoor toilet. I suddenly felt a painful sting in the back of my calf. It was our rooster which had just spurred me. This was the second time I had suffered from this hated bird. In my anger I picked up a corn fodder stalk and chased after the rooster until I was able to hit him repeatedly on one side of the head and then the other. When I was finished, he was staggering in a drunken circle. I don't think he bothered me after that.

One day I was sent to bring home the herd of cows which were grazing in a field east along the Charette Creek. One of the cows had a small calf. I was not having much luck getting the cows to move. Finally, I got too close to the calf. The mother came at me and caught me between her horns and was carrying me towards the barbed wire fence. There was a high pitched scream and the cow stopped and backed off. It was my sister, Phyllis. She was sent to see what was taking me so long. She arrived in time to save me from any injury.

One spring day, after rain had swollen the creek, we found a tree next to the stream that had a large vine growing into the limbs above the water. We cut the vine near the ground. One at a time we swung ourselves out over the raging water. By letting our feet drag in the water we could swing down stream. Then we lifted our feet on the way back. I hate to think what our chances would have been if the vine broke or we lost our grip.

FOOD

Strangely, we did not have a vegetable garden our last two years at the cabin. I really don't know about the years before that. There was an

obvious place above the rock wall where I'm sure a garden had once existed.

We did have a potato patch. It was a small part of the field below the cabin, just on the other side of the barn.

My sisters made cornbread almost everyday. Some of the other staples they prepared were fried potatoes, fried eggs and meat. Our cereal choices were corn flakes or puffed wheat. It was not unusual to have friend squirrel.

It was World War II and there was rationing of meat, sugar, and gasoline. Each family received rationing stamps which controlled the quantity one could purchase. Since we butchered and ate our own meat, meat stamps were not of great value to us. We traded meat stamps for sugar stamps with our friends in Overland.

Supplying our own meat meant we had to butcher hogs and steer. Butchering was not a pretty process. When Phyllis saw where and how we got meat, she became a vegetarian.

We had corn on the cob for the short time Dad could find ears from the field with tender kernels. Also, seasonally we picked blackberries to put on our cereal.

RECREATION

A big part of our recreation in the summer was our swimming hole in Charette Creek. It was an important day for me when I learned to dog paddle. We swam nude. At my age I took no interest in what my older sisters' naked bodies looked like.

We had a battery operated radio. In the evenings we listened to "Fibber McGee and Molly," "Inner Sanctum," "Lux Presents Hollywood," "Jack Benny," "George Burns and Gracie Allen," "The Green Hornet," and a variety of other programs. Dad often tuned in at noon when they gave farm prices and the weather forecast.

We had an old wind up victrola which played 78 RPM records. We had a dozen or so records, but all had scratches or "repeat grooves" except two: "Harbor Lights" and "Get Outta the Way for Old Dan Tucker." This last otherwise forgettable song, is permanently etched in my mind.

SCHOOL

It was a two mile walk to our one room school house called Rocky Ridge School. Mrs. Petersmeyer was our teacher. She drove out from Warrenton each day. The building is still there, on the east side of Schutzen Ground Road. It is rather close to the road and is larger now with additions.

We had no electricity. On cold winter mornings a fire was started in the wood burning stove before school. This chore was part of the job description for rural teachers.

I was lucky. In the fall of 1943 I was a third grader. That year Mrs. Petersmeyer was teaching grades 1,3,5, and 7. the following year she taught grades 2,4,6, and 8.

As best I remember there were twelve students from five families. We third graders, Ruth Gibson, Walter Baumann and myself were supposed to be doing our homework while Mrs. Petersmeyer was teaching the other classes. I remember that I spent much more time listening to the teacher's upper class lessons than doing my school work. Their lessons seemed more interesting than ours.

Once each year the county superintendent of schools Eli Mittler, showed up. He gave us a few encouraging words and then showed us a short film. The 35 mm projector must have been battery operated because, again, we didn't have electricity.

One morning we had a problem getting to school. It rained heavily during the night and the small creek which the cabin faces was a small river. Dad put a bridle on Fritz, got on his back, and pulled one of us up on the horse with him. Fritz waded through the stomach deep water to the

other side where one child was deposited. This was repeated until we were all across the creek. By evening when we returned from school, the water was down and it was easy to wade across.

On the way home from school only hundreds of feet from the cabin, a treat awaited me on fall days. I stopped, pulled up a small turnip, peeled it with my ever present pocket knife, and ate it as I walked the last few steps home from school.

The turnip patch was the same location as the potato patch. After digging up the potatoes Dad always sowed turnips.

A MOTHER ON WEEKENDS ONLY

During the last two years only the four of us lived in the log cabin except on the weekends when our mother joined us. She arrived late Friday evenings and left on Sunday afternoons.

We always looked forward to Mom's arrival. But on Sunday afternoon when she left, Phyllis cried. Mom probably took the bus from St. Louis to Warrenton. Dad normally drove into town to pick her up. When it rained it was not drivable. There were times he walked to meet her at what is now Sudden Valley Ranch. This was a mile and a half walk west over the hill where Mom's parents lived. On these occasions she was able to get a ride from Warrenton with one of her brothers or sisters.

One Friday evening after a rain when we knew Dad and Mom would be arriving over the hill, we stationed ourselves a good distance apart in the woods. When we heard their voices, we gave coyote calls back and forth. They claimed they were fooled and actually thought we were coyotes.

We three kids often had some short stupid skit we put on for our mother when she arrived on Friday night.

One December at school, Mrs. Petersmeyer taught us how we could make fake snow by whipping soap flakes. Dad cut a cedar tree and mounted it in the cabin. We made the fake snow and put it on all the limbs. Mom said it was the most beautiful Christmas tree she had ever seen.

When we lived in the log cabin, the downstairs had five rooms. The kitchen, large hall, and living room were as they exist today. But the front porch had been modified with a small bedroom at each end. The rest of the porch was screened in with no steps to the ground. The large hall was our dining room in the summer. We escaped the heat of the kitchen and a breeze came through with the front and back doors open.



1944

There was a wood burning stove in the living room. The upstairs had a bedroom above the living room. The room above the kitchen stayed unused. The junk left by the previous family occupied this room.

Because of the lack of indoor plumbing, I kept a number ten tin can under my bed at night. We didn't waste money buying toilet paper. Corn cobs and the Sears Roebuck catalogue existed in the outhouse for that purpose.

An important year was 1945. The war ended, along with Mom's job. My grandfather, August Hummel, died. We moved to the August Hummel farm in Truesdale. My mother was happy with the arrangement. She now had electricity and running water.

So in the summer of 1945 all livestock, farm equipment and personal possessions were moved to the farm in Truesdale. The log cabin was abandoned to the elements for half a century until the people of Innsbook had a better idea. It is wonderful to see the restoration of a building that reminds me of an important part of my life.

CONCLUSION

Growing up in a log cabin, on a farm surrounded by wilderness until age ten, is part of who I am. I didn't reflect on it at the time, but I observed, experienced and remembered. We struggled to survive, therefore our experience tells us that life is precious. We listened to drama on the radio, therefore we used our imagination. The mindlessness of television came later. I observed the cruelty of the animal food chain in the wild plus the pecking order of domesticated animals and today wonder if "animal rights" people get their input from Disney cartoons.

I think I have an attitude of gratitude for the modern conveniences and comforts due to my early experience at the cabin. When I stand in awe of God and His creation you can guess where much of my input comes from.

I feel truly blessed by God. Not only has He forgiven my sins, but He made me part of a generation whose vocabulary does not include the word "entitlement." He allowed me to grow up in a time and place when we didn't just stand in awe of creation, but also the Creator. One can do worse than start out in a log cabin.

My sister, Gerry Murphy, and I think it is wonderful the way the log cabin is being rejuvenated. The invitations we have received to be part of the events there are much appreciated.

Best regards,
Wes Hummel