

Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

John Bulmer

Sundays with Grandpa by Tom Clark

My grandfather was an interesting man: a skilled woodworker who repaired and reproduced antique furniture, a self-taught artist, a collector of Indian arrowheads and antique rifles, and a knowledgeable outdoorsman. He was a quiet man with a subtle sense of humor, and he inspired me in numerous ways, though I didn't realize it until it was too late to thank him.

While growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, a good many Sunday dinners were eaten at Grandma and Grandpa's house. After dinner, my three siblings and I would find some way to amuse ourselves, often with checkers or some other game (my grandparents did not have a television; in fact, there was no central heat or indoor bathroom!) while the "old folks" discussed weather, politics, neighbors, farming and who knows what else.

When Grandma and Mom decided to start dishes, Grandpa would calmly announce he was going for a walk. As if he had used a bullhorn, his four grandchildren crowded around him. "Are you going to the woods?" "Can we go?" He would agree to let us come, then don his red & black checkered wool hunting shirt, pick up his handmade walking stick with the likeness of a plains Indian chief in full headdress carved on the handle, and off we'd go.

One early spring day, we followed the well-worn single file path that circled the pond and headed into the lane that ran through the fields to the woods. Anyone watching our procession of a tall, lanky man with a walking stick and a pipe loosely hanging between his teeth, with four noisy kids hustling along behind him, would certainly think the Pied Piper was in the area.

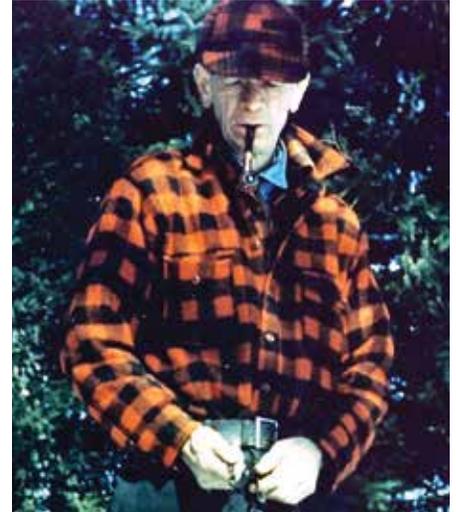
Before long we were confronted with tall evergreens, and suddenly everything was still and quiet. Even four ram-bunctious kids took on an almost reverent silence, as though walking into church. The pine needles cushioned our steps, and with the exception of an occasional snapping twig under our feet or the swishing breeze in the tree tops, there was silence.

Grandpa took his time when we were in the woods, stopping to point out something of interest in hopes that it might stick in our little brains: some fungus on a tree trunk, an early spring flower, a hole in a tree trunk used by some critter, a deer track. It didn't matter how small; he made sure we saw it.

This spring day, he pointed to a bright green patch in the otherwise dull brown of early spring. Leeks! The pungent-smelling, onion-like plants that show themselves for a few weeks in early spring were a treat. We managed to extract some small bulbs from the dirt and leaves, cleaned them off a bit and then... we ate them! Nearby, Grandpa leaned on his walking stick and puffed on his pipe. When he started to head towards the lane, we knew it was time to go.

At the house, we burst through the door and rushed across the room to show Mom and Grandma the souvenirs of our excursion: some tightly gripped handfuls of badly wilted spring flowers and...our breath. Grandma said the flowers were pretty, but complained about our breath. Mom said she might have to keep us home from school! Grandpa hung his plaid shirt by the door, slipped off his boots, and casually made his way to his

Author's grandfather



"den" where his gun collection covered the walls and his arrowheads were displayed in self-made frames. He sat down in the homemade ladder-back chair by the stone fireplace, lit his pipe and smiled.



The author as a child at his grandfather's home.

An industrial mechanic by trade, lifelong Wyoming County resident **Tom Clark** is a nature enthusiast whose camera is always close at hand.