

# A Memorable Thanksgiving

"Over the river and through the woods, to Grandmother's house we go. The horse knows the way to carry the sleigh through the wide and drifting snow." My most memorable Thanksgiving did not cross any rivers. Pittsburgh has three rivers - the Allegheny flowing from the north, the Monongahela flowing from the south, and both forming the Ohio that flows west. My family kept south of the Ohio and the Monongahela, keeping to the hills that bordered them. Our vehicle was not a horse drawn sleigh but a 1948 Ford coupe, a two door vehicle with front seats that folded forward to allow access to the back. There were no woods along the way - only the house strewn hills from the southwestern end of the city to its southeastern end.

The trip to Grandma's house was not particularly memorable. We had made it many times. Dad drove the familiar streets from Sheraden, our neighborhood, through Elliott, West End and onto Brookline, where his parents lived. Their home on Bellaire Avenue had a living room that ran the width of the house and fronted a smaller dining room and kitchen, both facing the back of the house.

The dining room table barely accommodated the nine people gathered around it, those being my parents, my two older brothers, my

grandparents, two unmarried aunts, and myself. Platters of food covered every available surface. My brother Paul sat next to Grandpa whose frequent refrain was "Pass the rolls, Paulboy - they're the main course." To the chagrin of my grandmother, the Pillsbury rolls had baked for 20 minutes after she had struggled all day to prepare the other dishes for the holiday feast. It was the rolls that got the praise.

The memorable part of the day came after the meal when we put on our hats and coats to go home. As Dad opened the front door, three inches of snow greeted him, covering the porch, the porch steps and the long concrete steps leading down to the sidewalk. Dad took several minutes to clear the steps; otherwise they would have been too dangerous. When the family safely reached the sidewalk, he opened the car door and folded down the front passenger seat to let myself and my two brothers climb into the back. Cars did not yet have seat belts or car seats. We frequently knelt on the back seat to look out the rear window. Today was not one of those days. Our eyes were on the snow covered street that lay before us.

Bellaire Avenue is relatively flat by Pittsburgh standards, except for the section where my grandparents lived. Their house lay just beyond the crest of a steep hill. Dad's first challenge was to steer the car down that hill without hitting the cars parked on either side. The second challenge



was to climb the steeper hill that led to the flatter sections of Bellaire Avenue.

The Ford coupe made a careful descent, then began the slow, steady climb up the steeper hill. My brothers Chick and Paul looked out the side windows; myself, being the youngest, was relegated to the middle. Chick called out, "Fords take to the hills." It must have been a slogan he had heard on the radio - it would be years before we had a TV. Paul repeated the slogan and Chick pushed against the front seat, trying to help the car up the hill. Mother told Chick to stop, saying his pushing did not help. Dad said not a word until the Ford coupe topped the hill.

The coupe took the remaining gentle slopes in stride, but Pioneer Avenue lay ahead. It connected the hills of Brookline to the flats surrounding Saw Mill Run. The first major drop passed Elizabeth Seton High School where Dad's youngest sister, Marlene, went to school. Most days we would shout "There's Marlene's high school!" This night we riveted our eyes on the steep hill sliding beneath us. The final drop was worse because it had a bend at the bottom. Dad took it slow and we made it down to Saw Mill Run.

The hills surrounding Saw Mill Run provided wood for Pittsburgh in the 1700's. In the 1900's, those hills were steep and bare. The stream still ran into the Ohio River but its flow was greatly diminished. In the winter of

1950, the road along its flat banks provided a welcome respite from the snow covered hills. Dad drove along Saw Mill Run for a mile or two before making the familiar turn into West End.

The bridge over Saw Mill Run lead past a steel plant. Chick and Paul looked for the Men From Mars, the name they gave to the welders wearing protective face shields. The doors to the plant, normally open, were closed for Thanksgiving. No Men From Mars greeted us, only the continually falling snow. The streets through West End were as flat as Saw Mill Run until they came to Steuben Street, the road leading into the western hills.

Dad negotiated the hill bordering Steuben Street, only to find himself behind the Elliot/Sheraden trolley. The trolley made a steady climb up Steuben Street, then turned onto Chartiers Avenue and made the steeper climb into Elliott. Dad tried to follow but the coupe slid back down the hill. In desperation, Dad angled the back tires against the curb and inched his way up the hill, using the curb to keep from sliding back. The road into Elliott had never seemed so long.

At the top of the hill we thought we were home free. The road leading down from Elliott was not as steep as the one leading up. It made a gradual descent through a series of S-turns. On the first S-turn the Ford coupe fishtailed into the opposite lane. A car coming in the opposite



direction managed to stop. Mother gasped. In the back seat, the myth of safety came to a sudden end for three boys looking out the car windows.

The rest of the trip was uneventful. The remaining hills were small compared to those we had transversed. The Ford coupe took them in stride and parked on the hill beside our house, giving all passengers a big reason to be thankful. The snow continued for three more days, burying the Pittsburgh region in a record breaking 31 inches of snow. The snow of 1950 was memorable, but not more than the ride through the hills on Thanksgiving night.