

Growing Up in Vicksburg, 1938-1954

By

Carl R. Catherman

Harold T. Catherman and Sula S. Seebold were married on June 2, 1937 in Mifflinburg. They set up housekeeping in the front half of the house at 6529 Old Turnpike Road in Vicksburg and lived in the same house their entire lives. They had two children. I was born on August 4, 1938 at Geisinger Hospital and my sister Pat was born in 1943. After my paternal grandfather died in 1945 my father's mother came to live with us. After my maternal grandmother died in 1949 my father's mother went to live with her daughter and my mother's father moved into our home.

Going back to the 1700s my father's ancestry was roughly 60% of German extraction but every one of my mother's ancestors was German. My maternal grandparents routinely conversed in both English and Pennsylvania Dutch. During the period when my maternal grandfather was living with us he would often sit outside in nice weather and talk with neighbors. I was always amazed at their ability to switch from one language to another, often right in the middle of a sentence. Some of my mother's people were superstitious, believing in hexes (spells) and the healing powers of *braucherei* (powwow). I recall a visit to one of my maternal grandmother's relatives when part of the conversation revolved around the fact that their cows were not producing milk. They were thoroughly convinced that the cows had been "hexed" by one of their neighbors.

Since Vicksburg is unincorporated with no defined boundaries I define it as lying between the two signs along Route 45 at the east and west ends of the village announcing its presence and extending roughly one tenth of a mile to the north and south of the highway. At the time of my birth there were thirteen houses, a church, a general store and a gas station on the north side of the highway and eleven houses, one of them connected to a store with a small coal yard, on the south side. One house on the south side was the

former Great Western Hotel, most of which served as an antique store operated by the occupants. In addition, there was one farmhouse set back from the highway on the north side and three on the south, one of them



Great Western Hotel, Vicksburg

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along Beaver Run Road and finally, there were three houses and a feed mill on the north side of Beaver Run Road. The railroad station was situated on the south side of the tracks just east of Beaver Run Road and there was a grain storage building on the south side of the tracks on Cook Lane. Newton Benner was the postmaster and the post office was in his house at 6422 Old Turnpike Road. According to census records the population of Vicksburg in 1940 was 94.

Every one of those 94 souls was white and Protestant. Until I was 12 years old I had seen only one black person. He was one of the homeless men (we called them "hoboes") who would occasionally pass through the village and stop at our house for something to eat and drink. Good Christian woman that she was, my mother never turned anybody away.

The house into which my parents moved after their marriage was owned by Solomon Benner's widow, Mary. It had been built about 1860 by John Benner, Solomon Benner's father. When my parents moved in there was no indoor plumbing. To obtain water for drinking or cooking they had to knock

on the door separating the front rooms from the back and use the hand pump at the sink in Mrs. Benner's kitchen. Water for bathing had to be pumped from a cistern that collected rain water that then had to be heated on the kitchen stove. When my sister and I were young we bathed in a large galvanized tub. There was a workshop and wood shed behind the house and behind that a privy. My parent's purchased the house after Mrs. Benner's death in 1942 and at about the same time my father was appointed postmaster. The post office boxes and attending paraphernalia were installed in the wide hallway just inside the large front door of the house. Later my father installed a partial partition in the largest room of the house, creating an alcove into which the post office was moved. This also involved installing a door on the east side of the house. From the time I was about ten years old I was allowed to sort incoming mail, cancel the stamps on outgoing mail and sell stamps except when a visit from the postal inspector was scheduled.



Vicksburg Railroad Station

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Initially the mail was carried by train. My father would go to the railroad station with a bag of outgoing mail. This was hung on the mail crane, a tall pole with an extension attached at a right angle. When the train came by a postal employee in one of the cars would reach out and grab the mail bag with a

specially designed hook (he never missed) and threw out a bag of incoming mail as the train whizzed by. That was always exciting to see. Beginning on July 25, 1949, delivery by train was replaced by the HPO (Highway Post Office), a bus-type vehicle that traveled from Williamsport to Altoona and back each business day. Either by train or HPO a letter sent from a post office at one end of the county could be picked up by the addressee at the other end within an hour.

There were two things in the post office that were especially interesting to me. One was the variety of stamps that were supplied and I became a stamp collector. The other was the Wanted posters supplied by the FBI that were required to be displayed. The only name I remember from these posters was the infamous bank robber Willie Sutton, but I also recall there were posters for a number of leaders of the American Communist Party. Every time one of the offenders was apprehended the FBI would send a notice and his poster came down. I collected these too but eventually trashed them. I wish I hadn't. The Band Box (later the Pix) Theater in Mifflinburg brought a poster every week that was tacked outside at the entrance to the post office. I wish I had saved them too.

My parents made many improvements to the house, the first of which was the installation of indoor plumbing and not long after that the installation of a bathroom on the second floor. No more awful privy visits or galvanized washtubs! He built new kitchen cabinets. The icebox was replaced by an electric refrigerator. The coal-fired furnace was converted into an oil burner and a huge hole was dug in the west part of the yard for a thousand-gallon tank. A large balcony on the southeast corner was converted into a bedroom with many windows. This became my sleeping quarters and the open windows made sleeping in the summertime a pleasure but there was one disadvantage: no provision was made for pumping heat into the room, and getting out of bed on cold winter mornings was not great fun.

Outside, my father built a pig stable next to the fire pit in the southwest corner of the property and a smokehouse at the south end of the garden path. I can assure you that cleaning a pig stable is definitely the most disagreeable work I've ever done.

We raised two pigs every year and the work involved was richly rewarded when butchering day arrived. It was the only day of the year when we could dip bite-size pieces of pork liver from the scalding kettle, shake on a little salt and down a real treat. It was a long, hard day for men, women and children but one with great rewards. Except for the bristles, bones, kidneys, brains and tongues nothing was wasted. The stomachs were saved and used to make *seimawe* (stuffed pig stomach). Hearts, livers and some rib meat were used to make *panhaas* (scapple) and the rind was used to make cracklings. Some meat was ground to make sausage. Ham hocks would be used later to combine with dried apples and dumplings to make *schnitz un gnepp*. Pork chops were cut and packaged. Hams and shoulders would be sugar-cured and smoked along with bacon slabs that were hung by hooks in the cellar when the smoking process was completed.

We had a large garden in which we planted sweet corn, three kinds of beans, potatoes, tomatoes, onions, radishes, etc. There were raspberry bushes in one corner, rhubarb in another and a parsley patch. My father erected an arbor for Concord grapes. At one corner there was a shrub bush and after all these years I still can conjure up the smell of those shrubs. My mother did a lot of canning, not only some vegetables from the garden but also grape juice and peaches that were bought in the fall. When my maternal grandfather was living with us we went out every summer and picked wild elderberries to make pies. There were apple trees in our farm neighbor's field that were taken freely, as were walnuts from two trees on his property. We bought milk, unpasteurized, from the same farmer every day.

I started attending the Vicksburg one-room school in 1944. The school was located east of the village where Young Road meets Route 45. We really did walk uphill both ways to get to and from school and, unlike today, school was almost never closed or delayed because of bad weather. I remember walking to school sometimes when the work of the plows had deposited snow along the side of the highway that was well above the top of my head. We carried our lunches in paper bags or lunch boxes.

The school building had no plumbing and there was no well on the grounds so older students went every day to a nearby farm or house to carry drinking water for the pupils. There was a large wood-burning stove in the back of the room and in cold weather a new fire had to be built every morning. Wood was stored in a shed on the grounds. By mid-day those who sat close to the stove were roasting.

School opened with the roll call, a Bible reading, and the pledge of allegiance, followed by a few songs. Then the lessons began. With eight grades to instruct, each in several subjects, the teacher had a busy day and there was no time for individual attention. Pupils worked on their own initiative while the teacher was occupied with other grades. Nevertheless, we learned, most likely because our parents expected us to and sometimes I think it was in part because the blackboard was always filled with information that the classes ahead of us were learning.

I liked everything about school, the lessons, the access to books in the closet, the friendships and of course, recess and lunch time. I especially liked the geography books with the maps and pictures of landscapes, buildings and people that didn't look like us wearing strange looking clothing. At recess and lunchtime some of the younger boys played with toy tractors on the bank along Young Road. In nice weather we played softball and tag. When there was snow on the ground we threw snowballs and made tracks to play fox and goose. In the fall we built "huts" out of chicken wire at corners along the fence row and covered them with the fallen leaves.

All of this came to an abrupt end in 1948. During a violent August storm the entire roof of our schoolhouse was blown off. With only a few weeks left before the school term was to begin the directors made a decision to bus the pupils to Mifflinburg instead of making the necessary repairs. I was placed in the old academy building along with the other fourth, fifth and sixth graders. This building was located on Green Street where the Visitor's Center for the Mifflinburg Buggy Museum now stands. In seventh grade we entered the junior-senior high school, then located at the southeast corner of 3rd Street and Maple Street.

The Vicksburg school building was purchased by a family who put on a new roof. It still stands there with additional renovations. The elementary school at Buffalo Cross Roads was erected to replace it and other one-room schoolhouses.

In our little village there weren't many children. There were a few boys of my age but they lived on farms and had little time to play. My sister was a bit of a tomboy and we enjoyed climbing trees, as well as climbing around in a neighbor's barn. Our mother would have been horrified at some of the dangerous things we did but fortunately we never got hurt badly. In hot weather we often walked down to Beaver Run and played in the cool water. In the winter we threw snowballs and went sledding, usually down the long hill on Beaver Run Road south of the village. We had board games to play and some of my earliest memories are of our mother reading Bible stories to us. In the fall we enjoyed raking leaves and rolling around in the huge piles. There were a lot of trees on the property - several maples, a cedar, a catalpa with a trumpet vine climbing up its trunk, a very tall ginkgo, a hemlock and two horse chestnuts. We burned the leaves along the lane leading back to the farm south of our place and listened to the horse chestnuts popping in the fire. Being a hunter, my father always had guns in the house. Under his supervision my sister and I would shoot at targets in the fire pit with a .22 caliber rifle. She eventually became a better shot than I.

Like many boys in those days working to earn money I started with mowing lawns and paper routes. My first paper route was delivering the *Williamsport Sun* to a grand total of six customers who probably subscribed out of pity since there was virtually no news of local interest in it. That didn't last long and was replaced by delivering the *Grit* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* on Sundays, which was more successful, but riding a bicycle on a two-mile long route in the snow was not a lot of fun. I also worked on local farms during haymaking and grain harvesting seasons. When I was 13 I spent the summer working on a cousin's farm in Snyder County for room and board and a dollar a day. I also worked for several years at H. A. Cook & Sons, the general store across Route 45 from our place. It was a part-time job unpacking boxes and

stocking shelves after the store closed.

The store was operated by J. Paul "Pauley" Cook and it was an interesting place. While the store maintained a stock of some groceries it was primarily a dry goods store, selling work clothes, yard goods of material for making clothing, curtains, etc. and all of the sewing supplies needed to make them. The store was widely known and the clientele came from as far away as sixty miles. Closing time was six o'clock and that's when Pauley and I would start to work. One evening he had not locked the door more than a minute earlier when somebody knocked. Pauley went to the door and said in a loud voice, "We're closed." I could hear a voice from outside saying, "But we came all the way from State College." Pauley's response was, "Well, you'll have to come back another time because we close at six." That was the end of the conversation. During the day Pauley would frequently be playing checkers



H. A. Cook's store, Vicksburg

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at the grocery counter with one of the other older men in the community. If customers came in he would often tell them they had to wait until the game was finished. Nevertheless, he ran a profitable business. Pauley was a big fan of the Philadelphia Phillies baseball team and in those days many of the games were played in the daytime. He had a radio in the store and it was always on so he could listen to the broadcast if the Phillies were playing.

Pauley's son Gene lived near Philadelphia and several times during the year he would close the store and drive in his Packard to his son's house and stay for several days. On several occasions he took me along. He would schedule these trips when the Phillies were playing home games.

Every morning we would go to the dry goods wholesalers and he would look through their stock and place orders. Then we'd go to the Horn & Hardart Automat for lunch. If the Phillies were playing in the afternoon we'd go to the game. If they were playing at night we'd go to one of the big theaters to take in a movie, then go back to Gene's house for supper and then go to the ball game. In those days it was possible to sneak down to the locker room area and wait for the players to come out and ask for autographs. We did that on one occasion and I still have the program with several autographs.

Pauley was the first person in Vicksburg to own a television set. At that time the only two stations he could receive broadcast from Binghamton and Altoona. Reception wasn't always great but I would often visit in the evenings to watch. On nights when boxing matches were broadcast there were often a couple older men in the community who came to watch. There was a group of four men, two or more of whom would gather at Pauley's house to play *hasenpfeffer*, a trick-taking card game played with a pinochle deck. I watched long enough to learn the game and then joined the group - an unusual combination of one kid and men in their sixties.

My parents did not buy a television set until after I entered college. Nevertheless, we did on occasion watch TV in an unusual place. Paul Gearhart, a Vicksburg native, was an early television dealer. He built a little food stand on the top of New Berlin Mountain and installed a TV set. People flocked there to see this new invention and no doubt he induced a lot of people to purchase their own from him.

Radio was our source of entertainment in the 1940s. My mother listened to soap operas in the afternoon and after school I listened to Sky King and Bobby Benson and the B-Bar-B Riders which were adventure programs

geared toward young boys. In the evening there was a wide variety of comedies, crime shows, westerns, etc. to choose from. In terms of music there was a vast difference between radio in those days and now. Instead of limiting their programming to one type of music there was a wide variety of genres played in blocks of time. In the early 1940s WKOK in Sunbury was the closest station and most listened to. They played pop, hillbilly (as country music was commonly called in those days), polka bands and even the Metropolitan Opera broadcast on Saturday afternoons. The only other stations nearby were WLYC and WRAK in Williamsport. Later WMLP started broadcasting from Milton and WHLM and WCNR from Bloomsburg.

Bill Malone, a professor at Tulane University and expert on country music, wrote that after World War II there were more country music fans in Pennsylvania than any other state. There certainly were lots of them in the Central Susquehanna Valley and we were among them. Every radio station had live bands performing country music on Saturday mornings. These bands had a ready audience for personal appearances and plenty of venues at which to play, at least in the summertime. Not a weekend went by without a carnival or festival being held somewhere and country music bands were what drew the crowds. Even the tiniest hamlets, including Vicksburg, would host festivals as fundraisers, often sponsored by the local church. In addition, there were two country music parks that had nationally known artists performing on Sundays, Radio Corral near Montgomery and Summit Park at the foot of Shade Mountain south of Middleburg. Radio Corral was owned by the McNett brothers from Lycoming County who also had the most popular band in Central Pennsylvania. Bob McNett had been a member of the Drifting Cowboys, the band of superstar Hank Williams, and he had the connections in Nashville to bring Grand Ole Opry stars to their park. On many occasions I hitchhiked to Radio Corral for the afternoon show and then went to Summit Park for the evening show.

In addition to carnivals and festivals our family went to the Bloomsburg Fair every year on Saturday to watch the ARCD midget auto races. After driver Bert Brooks was killed in an accident right in front of our

grandstand seats my mother said she didn't ever want to see that again so from then on we went to the fair but not to the races. We also attended the Union County West End Fair every year, enjoying the rides, the food, the exhibits and the stage entertainment.

If there was a festival or carnival on Saturday night we went to Mifflinburg in the afternoon to do some shopping. Otherwise we went on Saturday night. In the 1940s Mifflinburg had a thriving business district and the streets were crowded with people on Saturday nights. We would buy beef and lunchmeats at Shively Brothers Meat Market and other groceries in the A & P store.

My sister and I would buy penny candy at either Steans Drug Store or O. R. Laney's 5 & 10¢ Store. Our mother would buy a variety of needed items at Laney's. I bought comic books and bubble gum packs containing baseball cards at the book store. Sometimes my father would go to the movies but my mother almost never did. The first movie that my father took me to see was a Laurel and Hardy comedy. Before going home we would go to either Denius's or Abby Scholl's Soda Fountain in the Mifflinburg Hotel for an ice cream treat. For some of our Christmas shopping we would go to the department stores in Sunbury.

My father had only one sister but my mother had two sisters and two brothers. Family gatherings were a common occurrence. On Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas my mother's people gathered at either our house (always on Easter) or at the house of one of her siblings. By the time I was 12 there were twenty people in the extended family. The men and children would eat first, at noon, and then the cooks ate. The amount of food was always more than was needed and in the afternoon the adults spent their time talking, when they were not dozing off. The children were playing outside. In the summer my mother's side of the family would gather to make ice cream. We always made three freezers, one chocolate, one vanilla and one flavored by whatever berry or fruit was in season. Of course the freezers were cranked by hand. My uncles and my father consumed prodigious amounts of ice cream. Their portions were often brought to them in serving bowls.

It was at one of these gatherings at my father's sister's house that I became a baseball fan, purely by accident. I was nine years old and while we were outside my three cousins said it was time to go inside and listen to the game on the radio. They were fans of the Philadelphia Athletics who on that day were playing the Detroit Tigers. I had no interest in listening to a baseball game but I had no choice. Out of spite I rooted for the Tigers and today I am still a Tigers fan.

When I was 11 a couple of close friends from Mifflinburg talked me into going out for Little League baseball. At first I was afraid of the hard-thrown pitches and would back up when I saw the ball coming. After a couple games I mustered up enough courage to stand in there and I got my first hit. I was hooked. The next year I was on the all-star team and we beat several local teams before we traveled to Williamsport to play against the Original Little League all-stars. We were leading 5-3 with two outs in the bottom of the last inning when an opposing player hit a home run with two men on base, sending us home as 6-5 losers. As mentioned earlier I spent the following summer working on my cousin's farm in Snyder County. Baseball lured me back after that and the next two years I played for Mifflinburg teams in both the Pony League and for the American Legion team, continuing to play for the latter until I was 18. That was followed by one summer playing in the Mifflinburg Church Softball League and one for the Fremont Bombers in the Tri-County League, the last at the invitation of a college friend. My baseball career ended when I was offered a teaching job in Salem, New Jersey.

My parents struggled financially during the early years of their marriage, coming in the final years of the Great Depression. My mother had a small jar of old coins, Indian Head pennies, V nickels and Barber dimes and quarters. On occasion she would dip into that jar to get enough money to pay for a loaf of bread. I've often wondered whether one or more of those coins might have considerable value today to a collector. Nevertheless, my parents were both hard workers and the financial difficulties vanished. In addition to serving as postmaster my father's main job was working second shift at the

Philco plant in Watsonstown. Since it was a defense contractor during World War II he was not subject to the draft.

In 1947 my main Christmas present was a bicycle. This might have been a consequence of an incident that happened the previous summer. I was visiting a school friend who had a bicycle and I quickly learned how to keep my balance but not much else. I started going down a hill and ran right into a parked pickup truck belonging to my friend's father. I didn't know how to apply the brake! On my birthday in 1950 I won the grand prize of a \$50 Schwinn at the opening of Rube Zimmerman's new gas station in Mifflinburg. Those two bikes were my transportation on pleasure rides and trips to Mifflinburg to the movies and to Little League baseball practice and games. On one occasion I rode and pushed my Schwinn all the way to the top of New Berlin Mountain. The bike had a speedometer and my intention was to see how fast I would be going when I reached New Berlin. Within a hundred yards I was pushing 40 mph. Fortunately, I had learned how to apply the brake.

By 1952 my father had purchased a new car. I'll never forget the day he told us that we were going on a trip when he had his vacation time in the summer. "Where?" my sister and I both asked. "To the Great Smoky Mountains." It was unbelievable! Knowing how much I loved maps my father got some Esso road maps and gave me the responsibility to plan the route. That was the first of annual vacation trips that continued for a number of years until my sister and I were both married. The love of travel is just one of many great gifts that our parents gave to me and my sister and fortunately we both married spouses who shared that passion.

As mentioned earlier, there were always guns in our house. My sister and I did not get anything near to the number of Christmas presents that many parents give their children today but when I was 8 years old my main present was a Daisy Red Ryder BB gun. I was thrilled to have my own gun. BB guns aren't very accurate but I did a lot of target shooting and during the next several years there were quite a few barn pigeons that ended up on my plate at suppertime. There isn't a lot of meat on a pigeon but it was tasty.

It was also about this time when my father started to take me along,

unarmed, when he hunted for rabbits and pheasants around Vicksburg. In those days rabbits and wild pheasants were abundant throughout Buffalo Valley. On the first day of small game season the fields around Vicksburg were filled with hunters and the sound of gunfire was almost constant. (Heavy rain and the subsequent flooding in 1972 decimated the wild pheasant population and the removal of fencerows by farmers took away the most important cover for rabbits. The old days will never return.) My main Christmas present when I was 13 was a shotgun. The next hunting season was my first for small game. My sister and I had been taught gun safety since we were very young and my performance in the field in 1952 was rewarded when my father said he would take me to camp for deer hunting, a year earlier than he had originally said. I'll never forget that first day of deer hunting. I didn't get much sleep the night before, both because of the anticipation and the sound of loud snoring from every corner of the sleeping quarters. It was a cold day and I had only a pair of wool socks and old rubber boots to keep my feet warm. They didn't. Nevertheless, it was a memorable day.

My father had not fished since he was still living with his parents. I wanted to go fishing so he bought two rods and we started to fish around 1948. For several years we only went trout fishing in small mountain streams that were not stocked with hatchery fish. Most of the fish we caught had to be released because they were under the then legal limit of six inches. We also fished for warm water fish (bass, panfish and carp) in Penns Creek between Switzer Run and New Berlin and Buffalo Creek between Beaver Run Road and Wolfland. After school I would often walk down to Beaver Run to fish. It was still stocked with trout in those days and I caught my first legal trout out of that little meadow stream. Later we started fishing in the larger stocked trout streams and sometimes my sister would go along. On one occasion when my father, a neighbor and I were fishing in Buffalo Creek I reeled in the strangest creature I had ever seen. The two adults told me it was a hellbender, which is a giant salamander.

My parents were devout Christians and we attended St. Paul's Evangelical United Brethren Church in Mifflinburg every Sunday. My sister

and I had idyllic childhoods and we will both be forever grateful for their loving care and for the life lessons we learned from them and our Vicksburg neighbors.

I thank Elwood and Anna (Burrey) Walter for refreshing my memory and relating to me some things about Vicksburg that I did not know. Elwood grew up on a farm just west of the village and Anna's parents owned and operated Burrey's store where I spent a lot of money on candy bars, ice cream and soft drinks. Both attended the Vicksburg School.

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