

Frank Slagle: Growing Up In Old Kettle Falls - Part 1

by Peggy Mandin



Frank Slagle

monthly Focus installments. Frank currently lives in Redmond, WA, runs two to three miles a day, walks five to nine miles once a week with a friend, drives a bright yellow Smart Car, does woodworking and sewing projects, and comes to visit Kettle Falls on a regular basis.

Frank's dad and uncle came west from North Carolina in the early 1900's. The two brothers first owned a store in Oroville, WA and one in Republic. When they heard about a store in Kettle Falls being for sale they bought the business. Later, the partnership was dissolved and Frank's dad became the sole proprietor. His mother was born in Chicago and moved west with her family after the death of her mother. Her father, Harry Brooks, published a newspaper called the Scimitar in the old town of Kettle Falls.

Frank was born in 1921 in the same "brown, one-story bungalow" as his brothers and sisters and where the family lived for a number of years. Frank describes the house as simply and sparsely furnished with a wood stove for heat and cooking purposes; refrigeration was provided by "blocks of ice in a wooden chest." There was an outhouse that was particularly miserable during the winter months.

Frank reported that he and his siblings were envied by the other kids in town because their dad owned a drug store with a soda fountain. The town of Kettle Falls was only five blocks wide and six blocks long, and their house was only "a couple of blocks from the store". On the north side of the "brown bungalow" was a small fruit orchard.

One day Frank's father brought home a phonograph and Frank "wanted to see the little people I was sure were inside"; later the phonograph was

traded for a radio that increased the family's status, as Frank thinks they were the first people in Kettle Falls to have one. His dad also bought one for the store and it was hard to close if the gathered customers were listening to a good program. Frank said that one of the earliest station call letters he remembers was, "This is station WWW, Walla Walla, Washington".

Frank and his brothers and sisters were usually left to devise their own entertainment; their parents were busy. This was sometimes a dubious proposition. They climbed tall trees, did gymnastics in the front yard, ate out of vegetable gardens and fruit orchards, devised ways to aggravate each other, built tent cities, dug under the neighbors fences, "hunted wild turkeys and prairie chickens" (that happened to live next door) and roasted them, ran with hoop (iron rings taken from discarded wagon wheels), played marbles, roller skated and shot BB guns. Frank even tried "parachuting" off the roof with an umbrella that turned inside out on him. He was more worried about his mother missing the umbrella than his bruises.

Frank's dad was prone to drinking a bit too much and was often unreliable in an emergency. As a result, Frank's mom became quite self-reliant, using her trusty stove poker for protection and to foil an attempted robbery at the drugstore. At one point Frank's dad considered selling the drug store and practicing law. "It was even suggested by some of his buddies that he should consider running for governor. He was politically motivated and many times hosted functions attended by the Democratic Governor of the State. He was often called upon to make speeches, and was well known throughout Eastern Washington. His

drinking problem, however, prevented him from achieving his goals.

Frank reported that the only source of income for Kettle Falls at that time was the White Pine Sawmill. With the depression "getting under way, there was no demand for lumber and the sawmill had shut down, laying off all its employees". This newfound idleness gave the men in the town more time to drink. "Prohibition on drinking, selling or brewing booze was still in effect, but the guys around town were making their own, usually in the cellars of their homes." Frank recalls one of his dad's batches "exploding in the middle of the night, like bombs going off under the house". Frank always felt that his mother was counting the explosions "with joy in her heart".

The year 1929 holds lasting memories for Frank. During that summer the only jobs available were fighting forest fires. A particularly stubborn fire started on Dollar Mountain in Ferry County across the river from Kettle Falls, and the town didn't see the sun all summer because of the smoke. Live cinders were blown as far as 40 miles south where they started new fires.

Besides destruction by fire, the stock market crash occurred. The bank in Kettle Falls failed. "Deposits were accepted as usual on a daily basis, until one day there was a sign on the front window stating the bank had gone broke and was now closed. This was a tremendous jolt to a town that already has lost almost everything."

That same year Frank's father died. Frank had just turned eight years old. This left Frank's mother, a widow at the age of 32, with six children to feed and care for in the midst of a depression.

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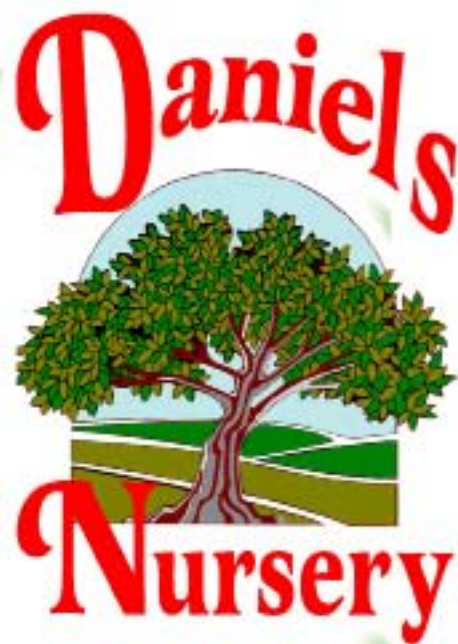
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