

## **Neighbors**

July 15, 2024

When I think of neighbors, it is hard not to have my mind flip back to childhood. I've written some about my neighborhood before, but mostly my childhood companions. This one describes the upstairs neighbors.

We moved into our two family house on Fellows Ave in Syracuse when I was less than a year old and I never left until I went off to college. Even then it was the home I returned to until my mother and step-father built a house on the outskirts of town on Makyes Rd. Families tended to stay put back in the 40's and 50's, so my neighborhood held some of the same people throughout my childhood.

First and foremost were our upstairs neighbors, Eleanor and Frank Houk. They actually moved in at the same time as we did because they lived above my grandfather, and then my mother and me, in an apartment building on University Ave. My grandfather moved there when my mother went off to pursue a career in NYC and he sold the big house on Windsor Place – too big for a man living alone. The Houks lived upstairs in the apartment building and when the building was closed for redesign to accommodate returning soldiers from WWII, everyone was forced to move out. My grandfather bought the place on Fellows Ave and invited the Houks to move there. So the Houks literally knew me from the day of my birth.

I suppose he charged them the same rate that they had all been paying in the apartment building. Years later, I learned from the Houk's daughter Helen that my grandfather never raised their rent for as long as he lived, 17 years from when we moved in. My stepfather must have been horrified after he married my mother when he learned what they were paying and immediately raised the rent. They moved out shortly after that, buying a home of their own in North Syracuse.

Having the Houks upstairs was like having an extra set of grandparents. Plus the cast of characters present up there evolved over the years. First, there was

“Grandpa Springstead,” Mrs Houk’s father. I’m not sure if he was already living with them in the apartment building, but he was certainly always there in my early childhood. He doted on me, would spend lots of time with my toddler self, and gave me hard candy which apparently I did not like but was too kind to tell him. Years later, Mrs Houk told me that she would find sticky pieces of candy hidden behind chairs and other places at the level of a small child. She never told on me though. She knew what I was up to and why and kindly kept it to herself, quietly cleaning up after me.

I remember a big event - Grandpa Springstead’s birthday with a cake fully covered with candles. It looked like 100 candles to me, but calculating back now, it probably was either 70 or 80, as he served in the Spanish American war at the end of the 1800’s and this would have been about 1947. It was quite a fire display. I was worried that it would burn the house down! It didn’t. Grandpa Springstead lived with his daughter and son-in-law until his death. It must have been my first experience with death, but I don’t actually remember it. I was probably no more than three at the time.

The Houk’s had two children who were young adults at the time. One was their daughter, Helen. I don’t actually remember her living up there, but I must have been around because there are stories of me sneaking upstairs and helping myself to her jewelry. She was married at the end of the war to Robert Morse. My mother must have been her maid-of-honor because there is a photo of her helping Helen dress for the big event. Helen adored me and named her first daughter Barbara. (There were very few little kids around to rival me for all of this lavished attention.)

Next “Sonny,” as their son Frances Jr. was called, came home from the war in Europe. I adored him. He would play with me and tease, throwing my pretend dog into the pretend fire in the fireplace while I appropriately shrieked and rescued the poor thing. Sonny ultimately married his war bride Ivy from England. I was very jealous of her and it took me several years to warm up to her. I never quite forgave her for marrying my best playmate.

The parade of people didn't stop there. Sonny and Ivy, along with their two boys, ended up moving into the third floor level of the house for many months when he lost his job and went to work for his father. There were two bedrooms up there plus a small bathroom. I'm sure this was not legal, but my grandfather was willing to accommodate them, rent free I'm sure.

When I was ten or eleven, Mr Lewin, a friend of "Daddy Houk," and a fellow musician, stayed with them for several months. As far as music goes, there were practices up there every Friday with Mr Houk on guitar or piano or sometimes fiddle, while several other men, all Shriners, played various instruments. I would beg my mother to allow me to stay up late and listen. They often played gigs at the Shriner's home for the aged, so they practiced songs that that generation would enjoy, things from the late 1800's to more up to date songs from the 1930's or 40's. I still know the words to an amazing array of songs that predated me by a good many years.

So back to Mr Lewin. He had played banjo with big bands in the '30's, but the banjo went out of style so he took up the guitar instead. He also played the baritone ukulele which is fingered like a guitar, but with only 4 strings. He said he would practice on it when he wanted to play softly, as when he needed to travel on a train. He encouraged my mother to purchase a baritone ukulele for me. I'm sure he helped pick it out, and taught me to play. During high school, several of the gals in my Girl Scout troop played, although they all had the smaller soprano ukes. We played and sang our way through life's events. After all, it was the folksong era. Then the uke went out of style, so I didn't have many opportunities to play. Much to my delight, the ukulele has now become popular again. I still have that original instrument although my kids finally insisted that I hang it on the wall and they gave me a nice new one.

The whole parade of characters "upstairs" certainly had a lasting influence on me, helping shape the person I am today. I will ever hold them with gratitude and affection.