

## History and his story

I'd like to tell you a story about my Grandpa, F.J. Saylor. For those of you who like history, you'll get a bit of that here. For those of you who like a good story, keep reading.



COURTESY PHOTO

Roxanne Henke

My grandpa, Fred (F.J.) was born in Odessa, Russia, in 1886 on New Year's Eve. When I was growing up, New Year's Eve was always a family party to celebrate Grandpa's birthday. I had no idea, until much later, that most people celebrated New Year's Eve much differently than having homemade ice cream churning contests in the basement.

Grandpa didn't talk often of his early years. I only once remember him telling the story of immigrating to the United States when he was 13. The family put their belongings into a wheelbarrow and pushed it to the docked ship that would take them to America. They went through Ellis Island, then boarded a train that brought them to the Midwest.

The family homesteaded a farm in northern South Dakota. But, farming wasn't in F.J.'s blood. At 17, he left home to work on the Soo Line railroad. Two years later, he moved to Wishek, working at a lumber company. He probably didn't know it then, but Wishek was to be his home for the rest of his life, and being a lumberman his life's work. He was paid \$30 per month and had to pay \$13 a month for room and board.

Some years later, in 1927, he started his own business, Saylor Lumber Company, and ended up buying out his competitors. Little did he know the Great Depression was looming. Business was practically nonexistent some months. Grandpa told me of the winter he would sit in the front porch of his house, where he could see the entrance of the yard. If a customer pulled up, he would grab his coat and hurry across the street to wait on the patron. You see, it cost too much to heat both his house and the business. One month during those years, he had one sale – some fence posts that cost 30 cents.

Thirty cents didn't go far in feeding six kids at home. But, somehow he made it through. After he told me that story, I had a greater understanding of why, whenever anyone would be the last one out of a room he'd say, "Make out the light." (A German-Russian way of telling someone to turn off the light.) Electricity cost money and every penny counted.

He and his family lived in a modest, two-story stucco house which, when I think about it, seems an odd choice of "siding" for a lumber man. But he lived there almost his whole life. In the front yard, he put

in a shallow, cement, goldfish pond. I have no idea what happened to those goldfish over the winter, but as a grandchild, I was fascinated by them in the summer. Right beside the pond was a big lilac bush. In the summer, my sisters and I were allowed to ride our bikes four blocks down the street from our house to Grandpa's. There, we were instructed to park our bikes by the lilac bush, and then carefully, looking both ways, walk across the highway to visit Grandpa at the lumberyard. I can still smell the sawdust as we were allowed to climb into the loft where the wood was stored. Then we went into the "nail room" and ran our hands through the bin of (ouch!) sharp nails.

In his later years, F.J. resided in the nursing home which happened to be right next door to the house where I grew up. He was confined to a wheelchair and my mom would often walk next door and wheel him up the little hill to our house, so he could sit outside and enjoy the fresh air.

One day, she asked him, "Is there anything you'd like to do today?"

My mom was expecting him to ask to be pushed along on a short walk, maybe ask for a piece of a pie. Instead he replied, "I'd like to lay down in the grass and look up at the sky."

So, my mom pushed his wheelchair into the green grass at the side of the driveway, and slowly, carefully, helped him slide out of the chair. She eased him back until he was lying flat on the grass. She said at first he just laid there. Then, slowly, he started moving his arms, turning his work-weathered hands so that they brushed against the lush, summer grass. His clear blue eyes focused on the sky. His face held the biggest smile.

What was he thinking? About his childhood in Russia? His voyage across the ocean, then the plains? The wife and children he'd outlived, but would soon see again? The full life he'd lived in a little town?

Grandpa Saylor died at the age of 88. He worked hard. Lived through almost a century of changes. And, was loved well.

This story always makes me aware of how little it can take to make someone happy. We think we need to live in big houses and buy expensive things, when instead the best is often the simplest – a wheelbarrow of belongings to start a new life, homemade ice cream surrounded by family on a birthday, teaching grandchildren the whimsy of a goldfish pond in North Dakota, or helping someone who can no longer touch the grass on his own. ■

**Roxanne (Roxy) Henke** lives in the same town where her grandpa lived, along with her husband, their dog and many wonderful memories of times gone by. She is the author of eight novels that have been re-released on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). You can contact her at: [roxannehenke@yahoo.com](mailto:roxannehenke@yahoo.com).