

Gene Skiba's Memoirs

Note: Gene Skiba, founding member of the New Brighton Area Historical Society, has written a colorful account of his life story. Gene is the former editor of the New Brighton Bulletin and many of us remember his historical columns, "This and Data," from which came his book, A Centennial History of New Brighton, Minnesota. The NBAHS will run a portion of his memoirs in this newsletter, with the completion in the spring newsletter. We know you'll enjoy this fascinating story.

THE JOSEPH SKIBA FAMILY that writer Eugene (Gene) Skiba is part of originated in the parish of Lesno, West Prussia, where Joseph was born on July 4, 1837, (the coincidental famous American date - Fourth of July - would make for an annual double celebration date for the Skiba family). Joseph's parents (Gene's paternal great-grandparents) were Thomas and Constantia (nee Podlasek) Skiba. They were baptized in Our Lady of the Angels Church in Lesno where church records reveal many Skiba families in the parish, where the name also was spelled Skibo.

Because of long-suffering abuse and persecution, mostly at the hands of Teutons (other Germans), they had as their ultimate goal settlement in America, land of opportunity and true freedom.

Most of these Poles were known as Kaszubs (pronounced "Kashubs" or "Kashubas,") a very proud Polish-German ethnic group of Slavic origins that spoke their own language. For centuries these Kashubs had lived in the northern section of Poland south of Gdansk (known as Danzig by Germans), port on the Baltic Sea, and were known as "fisher people."

It wasn't until 1868 that a Polish Kashuban group broke away and came to America. On the ship Emil they left the port of Bremen on April 18, 1868, and arrived in Quebec, Canada, on June 17, 1868. But tragedy followed, with Joseph's wife,

Maryanna, contracting typhoid aboard ship and dying; their child Francesca, one year old, survived, and Skiba family kids would know her by the quaint and over-formal name of "Auntie Olchefski" (her husband was John Olchefski, another Kashuban).

Whereas one Polish Kashuban group settled in the Ottawa, Canada, area, another came to Winona, Minnesota, U.S.A. About a year after coming to Canada, Joseph Skiba with Paul Waldoch and other Kashubans relocated in Minnesota. Joseph's younger brother Paul remained in Canada.

His first year in Minnesota Joseph Skiba worked at the Calvary Cemetery in St. Paul, after which he moved to Mounds View Township (1870). Over the years he increased his property holdings his sons in time came to own, and he encouraged fellow Poles to settle in the community. Timothy O'Connell, a Mounds View Township founder and justice of the peace, was a near neighbor.

While in Canada Joseph had wed a second time, a young woman named Dorothy Retz who also died of illness. Four children blessed that marriage: sons, John, Anthony and Thomas, and a daughter: Susan (later Lasker).

In time Joseph wed a third time, 16-year-old Maryanna Kukla who had been raised by the neighboring Cmiel family. This marriage proved most bountiful with 13 children--six daughters: Agnes, Anna, Sophia, Josephine, Pauline and Lucy, and seven sons: Frank, Alec, Clement, Albert, Martin, Raymond and Leo.

Clement was Eugene's father. Upon his marriage to Rose Blanski (of a Kashuban family in the Village of New Brighton) he purchased the 20-acre farm of his half sister Frances ("Auntie Olchefski," remember?) whose husband John Olchefski had died of injuries after being dragged by a team of runaway horses. Clement hoped to come by 40 acres of adjacent property that were in tax arrears. Otherwise, he and his nephew Julius Boryczka built a gasoline service station on Clem's property adjacent to the key Highways 62 and 63 intersection (later renumbered to 8 and 10). Clement

Skiba was clerk of the Mounds View Town Board for a number of years until his untimely death from a fall in 1932. As an eight-year-old, Eugene well knew sorrow at his father's death and mother's heartbreak and near collapse. Reviewal held in their farmhouse brought a heavy turnout of family, neighbors, friends, etc. Clement had been a well-liked man, and Eugene would never forget impressionistic memories such as his father's sincere "You're welcome, don't mention it!" reply to folks who came to his house for official business such as notary public and meeting minutes.

"It was a difficult survival for us during those Depression years," states Gene. "Our family consisted of our mother Rose, three brothers Clem Jr., James and I, sister Esther and also my Aunt Theresa Blanski and her daughter Rosemary who lived with us. Worst of all, my mother died of tuberculosis when I was a sophomore in high school. Caroline Blanski, our maternal grandmother who had moved from her home in New Brighton to ours in Mounds View during our mother's illness, was appointed our legal guardian and got strong assistance from Aunt Theresa whose car we used in traveling to high school, John Marshall in southeast Minneapolis.

Frank and Caroline Blanski, my maternal grandparents, also Kashuban Poles born in what they liked to term "the Old Country," came to New Brighton near the turn of the century from Chaska, Minnesota. They sired a large family of ten children, eight of whom survived: Frank, John, George, Joseph, Rose, Henry, Raymond and Theresa. Mary, their firstborn, died in infancy and Helen, eight, died of heart disease. Frank's earlier background is sketchy, whereas Caroline, who wed at 16, was proud of her German-Polish roots that included Krieger and Malenofski families.

Tragedy struck the Blanski family in 1912 when Frank the elder died of lockjaw following a scalding accident in a packing plant. In her struggle to raise her now fatherless family, Caroline became prominent as a midwife who helped bring babies into the world free of charge, with her payment usually in produce instead of money--such as

fish, deer meat, sausage and hogsheads.

She took pride in outguessing the doctor as to when each child would be born. Her good friends included Caroline Beisswenger and Anna Hipp; the three of them loved to get together and converse in German. Caroline's foreign accent of English was a colorful delight to hear. She exchanged letters in German with relatives living in Springfield, Illinois. Gene, who believes he was his grandmother's favorite, visited her often and accompanied her on walks downtown for groceries and the mail.

Having attained the desired three score and ten and as a third generation Pole in America, Gene Skiba says that he thinks of his historic place as being one in which he witnessed the transition from the old, or earlier, years and their conditions with the new, later, years with their struggle, progress and advancement.

For instance, reliable electricity was rather recent, as was the automobile which had now replaced the horse and buggy as the principal inland transportation mode. Interestingly to a growing boy's alert ears, what his grandmothers referred to as buggy sheds were more and more becoming known as garages to their sons. First cars for Gene's father Clem and Uncle Albert were identical Dodge touring cars with isinglass windows the boys mischievously used to crack, not without punishment. Most boys became adept at tinkering with cars, tuning them up and overhauling them; winterizing them could at times be a harrowing chore--anti-freeze (at first alcohol) for the radiator, batteries charged to full power, annually changing stubborn license plates, tires and tubes repaired or replaced--up to the present when car batteries and tires came to last virtually forever. Early cars had cranks to get them started and you had to grip without using the thumb which could result in a broken arm upon kickback.

"During my earliest 15 years," Gene recalls, "our refrigeration for food remained quite primitive at our house--we got ice from Long Lake in midwinter and brought it to our icehouse to cover in thick layers of sawdust. Beginning in spring and carrying through summer

and fall, it was a chore to dig ice out, cut and chip it to size for use in the kitchen icebox; the longer homemakers could preserve food perishables, the fewer times she need shop at the grocers, and the better she could plan. And during the heat and humidity of torrid summertime, what a treat it was to apply bare feet to blocks of ice! It wasn't until the mid-1930s that kitchen-size electric refrigerators were perfected and Mom bought one second hand from Fred Beisswenger. What a handy improvement, somewhat on the order of today's microwave ovens, but even more so!"

The house was heated by a range in the kitchen and an upright heater in the living-room," Gene continues, stressing that a lot of labor was required to keep the fires burning. "One of the last memories I have of time shared with my father was in traveling to southeast Minneapolis with him to salvage wood damaged when a grain elevator caught fire. That wood was cut and used for kindling."

Gene notes that the kitchen range in our Historical Society's History Center is ever remindful of the many meals made on a similar range in the Skiba home. Using wide-wired tongs, Gene recalls, "We made toast by putting bread right in the fire, and it was a challenge and skill to do it without charring or burning the bread--or your hands! Besides heating, cooking and baking--Mom baked bread almost daily--the range was responsible in assisting with many necessities such as laundry, bathing, shampooing, etc. A very major improvement came when the kitchen range was converted from wood to oil consumption--no more locating more wood, splitting and hauling it to the big woodboxes. A 2 1/2 gallon jug of heating oil lasted 24 hours and burned for 24 hours--what a godsend!

"As for the heater in the living room of our big drafty house, it ate wood hungrily and hard wood such as oak was a winter necessity. We also burned chunk coal--we couldn't afford the briquet size--and it was a treat to welcome Mr. Franklin Searles and his son Dewey when they delivered it from their lumber and coal yard, they were such nice, affable people, as I

had learned accompanying Grandma Blanski when she stopped for mail at the post office located in their business office in New Brighton."

An advancement of note that came with electricity was a washing machine that no longer requires ladies of the house to wring wet clothes out by hand--such a rigorous, even painful, work chore it was.

Electricity did not extend to providing water--"we had to do it chiefly by pumping it because the windmill depended often upon strong wind velocity and didn't work that well. We kids weren't strong enough to help Mom with the laundry, except to provide the water by pumping it from the well outside. Each week it was a Sunday afternoon chore to pump two washtubs full for Monday's wash; it was a tiresome job and as the oldest child its responsibility was chiefly mine. And later I would understand that the insistence of mother and grandmother for cleanliness and neatness was part of the proud Polish mystique they embraced and were part of."

His mother's early iron was just that, Gene continues. "Its metal was solid iron and very heavy and had to be heated on the kitchen range before it was yanked up to transfer heat to bedding, shirts, pants, dresses and whatever. But thanks again for electricity's coming which allowed lighter iron appliances and swifter application. More could now be done in less time and more ease."

"Many the evening I spent with school homework or reading a book with stockinged feet stuffed in the oven of the range. One memory giving perspective of the Depression time and our struggle in it was the time Mom scolded me for staying up so long (9:15 p.m. at the latest) and burning lights which made for a higher electric bill."

The coming of radio was a luxury, no less, and another credit for electricity. In late afternoon Gene says he would walk the short distance to the gasoline station on the highway corner and listen to the radio the stationman had--programs such as "Tarzan of the Apes," "Skippy," "Buck Rogers in the 25th Century," "Jack Armstrong the All-American Boy," and later in the

evening, "Tom Mix and the Ralston Straight-Shooters," "The Lone Ranger," "Little Orphan Annie," "Superman" and "The Air Adventures of Jimmy Allen." Minneapolis Millers and Saint Paul Saints baseball games along with the World Series were favorites and Golden Gopher football games when the Gophers annually were national powers. Mornings before walking schoolward there were news broadcasts and the Dayton's Musical Chimes program featuring popular songs of the day. Evening programs had their don't-miss time slots and it seemed a crying shame that programs conflicted, such as Bob Hope with Kate Smith or Fibber McGee with Gangbusters, the latter a conversation piece of kids before school or at recess. The Hit Parade program with its most popular songs of the day made everyone aware of music as never before.

**(To be continued in the
NBAHS spring newsletter)**

Gene Skiba's Memoirs

To the reader: This newsletter continues with the last portion of Gene Skiba's memoirs. The first portion appeared in the NBAHS January newsletter. (If for some reason, you did not receive Part I, contact Joyce at 633-1499 for another copy.)

Gene remembers when hunting game was still allowed in Ramsey County. "My Uncle Henry Blanski and his friends the Hipp brothers--Joe, Pete, Dick, Eddie and Lenny--would hunt pheasants in the back meadow behind our property, or ducks on the ponds and marshlands west of my father's farm to the east and winding Rice Creek and Ganter's woods to the west. But before my brothers, cousins and I were old enough to get hunting licenses, hunting was banned in the county and has been ever since except for a special time when deer

herds were reduced in the Twin Cities Arsenal area.; otherwise, I seem to recall some suppers that featured squirrel meat (wink, wink!)."

As for education, Gene says his eight years in the one-room school west of the picturesque Mounds seemingly went by much too fast, a period in his life he enjoyed immensely. But he expressed regret that even in his day *many* students still were not graduating before the age of sixteen when by law they could terminate attending; the law had been enacted in early township days to allow students to assist their parents at both planting and harvest, giving them flexibility in making up for time absent from school. "But some parents apparently did not look upon education as important as they did later," Gene speculates, "for allowing their children to decide the issue had become somewhat traditional. In our home, our mother didn't consider there was a choice even though with our father deceased and the Depression years so difficult she could have used even the minuscule seeming \$1.25 or \$1.50 a day working at local garden, hog or dairy farms.

"Sports highlights of those golden days occurred when our one-room ball team beat New Brighton's three-room school team((led by our stellar athlete Harold Waldoch we did it twice), winning both the kittenball and dodgeball county rural schools championships in 1935, and Miss Brennan, our teacher, naming me captain of the 1937 team which scored 35 runs to wallop Snail Lake's team. We also won the shuttle relay championship in 1935 but didn't get a trophy for it because the rural school district couldn't afford it, so we were told."

Nine students (considered a large class) from Mounds View School District 15 graduated with the Rural Ramsey County Schools Class of June 1937: Cousins Leonard, Raymond Jr. and Eugene Skiba, Cousins Marcella and Edward Rybak, and Bernice Waldoch, Leone Bjorkman, Ambrose Gabrysh and Lyle Zabel. They received their diplomas in ceremonies at Washington School at White Bear Lake.

To attend high school as the three Skiba cousins did meant traveling daily to the city. "Most of my New Brighton area contemporaries attended Minneapolis Edison High, but my good friend Norbert Zamor persuaded me to attend his alma mater, Marshall High on the University of Minnesota campus," Gene notes farther. Students in the eastern township attended St. Paul Washington High. A few years later area high school students attended White Bear Lake High, and it wasn't until 1954 that Mounds View High opened, giving the local area its first high school, and later came Irondale and Totino high schools in response to the population explosions.

For a time Gene operated the gasoline station his father had built years before but that business and even the Skiba home were condemned for a huge State Highway Department project forced by heavy traffic in the Twins Cities Arsenal federal defense plant area. Besides widening the highways in the 8 and 10 intersection area, a new east-west road numbered 100 was built greatly opening travel in and from those directions and was a forerunner of the Freeways 35 and 694 crisscrossing the Village still later. "Home on leave from the service, I was shocked at the sight of the broad new highway cutting through the old Beisswenger farm fields where I had worked for seven summers and barefooted to go swimming and fishing at both Pike and Long lakes on many a carefree evening." Gene stresses that "Luckily we were able to purchase our grandmother's home in New Brighton to which we moved to in the summer of 1942."

During World War II, Gene's 3 1/2 years in the U.S. Army Air Corps consisted of considerable flight training and service in the Southwest Pacific Theater of operations where he was an aerial navigator in a troop carrier and combat cargo wing.

Returned to civilian life, he operated a gasoline station in southwest Minneapolis for a time, won appointment as Rural Mail Carrier out of the New Brighton Post Office branch which he held for 4 1/2 years, and later

worked for 31 years as editor and columnist for the Rose Tribune (two years) and the New Brighton Bulletin (29 years), retiring in 1988.

In 1959 Gene wed Vernice Jouppe, a Finnish girl living in Lexington. They have four children - three daughters and a son - and ten grandchildren - five granddaughters and five grandsons.

To round off this biography, the following organizations Gene Skiba has belonged to suggest areas past and present in which he has participated:

St. John the Baptist Catholic Church
New Brighton Area Historical Society (a founder)
New Brighton Sportsmen's Club
New Brighton Eagles Aerie
Schafman-Olson Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 724
Tri-City American Legion Post 513 (currently Historian for)
Friends of the Ramsey County Libraries
Book-of-the-Month Club
Boy Scout counselor
Loft literary organization

Editors note: Many, many thanks from the New Brighton Area Historical Board of Directors to Gene Skiba for his countless hours in working for the society. We are indebted to Gene for his numerous contributions to telling the story of the New Brighton area.