The Haircutter

By Rose Ann Blankenship Edwards

In the past, I had done business with the man who said to me, out of the blue, "Was your dad Steve Blankenship?" When I answered in the affirmative, he replied, "Well, he used to cut my hair when I was a boy. He certainly was a real nice guy." And then the memories came flooding back!

The Depression was cutting deeply in 1931 when, because of Mother's health, we moved from Cow Hill in New Straitsville, Ohio, to level ground and a smaller home just two miles down the road.

The home had a garage behind it with a 12 x 24-foot extension over the top of a cellar, where we stored the summer's harvest of canned vegetables, fruits and potatoes.

A workbench was built over the top of the cellar steps. Nails were straightened and sorted there, and nuts and bolts also found their niche. Everything had a place.

This is where he repaired the carpet beater, toaster and tricycles, made Christmas gifts, and repainted items in need. A piece of iron lay there to crack the fall's harvest of hickory nuts and black walnuts. The memory of the tasty cake and fudge made with those nuts still makes my mouth water.

On the workbench shelf there rested a bag half-full of smoking tobacco, which represented Daddy's goodbye to the pipe-and-chewing-tobacco era of his life. He blamed the tobacco when he became ill after a very hot, hardworking day at the brick plant.

A potbellied stove sat in the center of the room, and his toolbox sat along the wall. Above it hung a large frame that held his prized Indian arrowheads.

The toolbox served as a table for playing cards, Ole Sol or cribbage. Friends sat around to whittle, shoot the breeze, and argue the merits of Democrat vs. Republican, the WPA and FDR while Daddy cut someone's hair.

Stephen E. Blankenship prepares to return to Akron after a visit home during World War II. He is standing by "the building."

In the far corner of the room was a small homemade desk with a crystal radio set that occupied some of the spare time of my two older brothers and their friends. They had a stash of detective books in the drawer and the ever-present deck of cards. Daddy's theory was that he knew where the boys were if they were up in "the building."

Daddy probably learned to cut hair when his dad became ill. He, in turn, cut my brothers' hair—and mine, too, when "bobbing" replaced long curls. Neighbors began asking him to "trim a little," and he obliged.

Each time he cut a head of hair, he wrote it down in a little spiral notebook with a stub of a pencil and charged the customer 25 cents—if he could afford it, that is. Otherwise, he would simply say, "Never mind, maybe next time" to those who were down and out. He liked to see folks looking neat.

Many times he'd take the quarter offered by a little fellow and tell him to wait a minute until he got some change. Then he'd fish around in his pocket and give the little guy a dime and three nickels and tell him, "Be sure to give this to your mom." That was my dad!

He insisted that he was not a barber; he just cut hair. He sterilized his tools with peroxide after each cutting. A leather strap hung on the wall to sharpen the straight razor he used to trim around the ears, and his clippers were hand-pumped.

He was quite happy when he saved enough quarters to purchase an electric clipper, and he was *really* happy to obtain a used, red-upholstered barber chair at a cost of $2. The neighbor kids and I were allowed to pump it up high and twirl it 'round and 'round. We had a carnival ride right there at home, rain or shine!

Daddy was happy with his little haircutting center. He dressed it up by papering the walls near the barber chair with brown butcher paper on which he wrote notes about an unusual late frost, early snows, the date my brother entered the Marine Corps, the wreck on the curve, the death of a friend, and the one that makes me chuckle yet—the note about the fact that Hubert, one of the Dunkle twins, was the one with the mole behind his ear!

As you can guess, that building was used for a lot. My brothers were required to go up there to smoke or play cards. I had to go there to practice my trumpet (I wonder why?). On cold winter days it was the clothes dryer.

Here he fixed skates, made stilts, painted tricycles and built wheelbarrows for his grandkids. It was the first-aid room for rough-and-tumble kids who had dropped from a grapevine or cut their feet on glass in the bottom of the pond. There were times when it served as a spot to lecture a wayward son or daughter when he didn't want to concern Mother with our errant ways. However, she always knew, and believe me, they agreed on the outcome!

Daddy spent the war years in an Akron defense plant, and the building stood idle until his return when the war ended. Soon the familiar "Got time to cut my hair, Steve?" became the norm.

I married my sailor when he came back, and he liked to have his hair cut in a flattop. That was a new one for Daddy, but he mastered it, and many other young men requested it.

Around 1951, his health began to fail, and state regulations were established for barbering, so he gave up his haircutting hobby.

I was indeed fortunate to have been guided through childhood by this loving, honest and compassionate man, my dad, the haircutter of the Good Old Days. ❖

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