

CHAPTER 3

ON TIPPING THE HAT

When I was five years old, It Just So Happened that time and things turned out agreeable for a trip to Rochester, New York, to visit the other side of the family. We took a train to Ohio, then boarded a big paddle wheel boat and did Lake Erie from Cleveland to Buffalo.

Buffalo, as probably few of you know, is on one end of the Erie Canal: that canal stretching from Albany, New York, 363 miles to Buffalo, New York. It was completed in 1824. This "big ditch" had dramatic dimension in the rise and fame and other things of the Tremmel tradition. This dimension got started somewhere in Germany.

GREAT-GREAT GRANDFATHER BY THE CHURCH. His name was Johann Beikirch (*beikirch*, "by-the-church"). He apparently had been drafted into the Prussian army and was not exactly delighted with the situation. We do not know what plot and plan he had for the future. But we do know that he was aware of a place called Rochester, a town somewhere along the route of a big ditch being built somewhere in New York in the USA. He knew this because of some communicating that had gone on between his folks and a family that had moved there. A family who had a daughter of the right size, shape, and age.

Johann seemed to have had an interest in daughters of right size, shape, and age. This is evident in something that happened not in Rochester where he was not, but in Germany somewhere where he was. He and a girl of right size, shape, and age went to a dance together. During that dance an officer, apparently also impressed with right size, shape, and age, moved in and took over. Johann was dismissed. Slow burning fury ensued, and perhaps also considerable beer consumption. Whatever, Johann, later that night, waylaid that offending officer and dealt with him in a pugilistic fashion. That accomplished, Johann executed a second plan of action. He left Germany in a hurry and headed for that "big ditch".

Once in New York, he went up the Hudson River to Albany, and there it was--that ditch; not finished yet, but pretty close to finished. Walk that ditch bank far enough, about two-hundred and ninety miles, and find the Village of Rochester, and also find that girl. Johann walked it. Then one thing led to another: a wedding happened; then children happened, one of whom was my grandmother.

Grandmother Caroline grew up and married a man named Tremmel. With him she had two sons--Joseph and John. Then that Tremmel husband died. She married another Tremmel--a brother of the first Tremmel. That second Tremmel's name was Jacob. He was my father William Anthony's dad. He died while William Anthony was a small child. It was at that point that Grandmother Tremmel and her three boys moved in with Grandfather Beikirch. He became my father's surrogate father.

THE ENTREPRENEUR. Before more about Grandmother Tremmel, let us examine more about Great-grandfather Beikirch. First, we might observe that

great-grandfather was something of an entrepreneur. In those days Rochester was not much of a place, but with that canal being built and almost finished, the prospects of the future were rather attractive. Land prices, especially along the canal, should do a bit of rocketing.

What to do? Form a partnership. Get some money. Become a land holder. Net result? Great-grandfather Beikirch became a wealthy and leading citizen in the growingly prosperous City of Rochester. Indeed, he got so prosperous that he and three other Rochesterans endowed the building of a new Catholic church: St. Boniface Catholic Church, where each year, my father told me, a mass was said for the "happy repose" of great-grandfather's soul.

And he might have needed it because land owning was not the only business operation great-grandfather ever engaged in. At a later time he and some colleagues tried to curb the wheat market. They contracted to buy wheat at a certain price if it were delivered by a certain date. They were to get the wheat at a much cheaper price if the western farmers could not deliver on that date. The hooker was that great-grandpa, and his colleagues had bought off the railroads. There were to be no western wheat deliveries before that "crash date," by virtue of chicanery.

What G-G-Pa and Company forgot to do was buy off the Arm & Hammer fleet on the Great Lakes. Net result? The Beikirch fortune went west. Oh, not completely so. The Beikirch clan still lived pretty well in their house on the bank of the Erie Canal. Also, the truly important indication of Beikirch financial success became evident in the summer of 1936. I had just graduated from high school. I wanted to go to college, but nobody (my family never talked about spending money) seemed anxious to fund my ambition. Then two items of information arrived from Rochester: Grandmother Tremmel (Johann's sole surviving child) had died; and William C's share in the Beikirch/Tremmel estate was \$125. Don't say, "That's not much." It was with that \$125 that I got through the door into college, and I am still there.

And, of course, we can hope (if not assume) that Johann's "rest in peace" is still being "massed" once each year in the St. Boniface Church.

NO RED NECKS HERE. That Beikirch church was, of course, intended primarily for German-American Catholics, not Irish-American Catholics. Those Irish Red Necks had their own church (probably called St. Patrick's). Let them go to it.

My Father explained to me, with his usual twinkle of humor, that in his world there were Catholics and Catholics. The Red Neck Catholics were the Irish Catholics who had red necks (sunburned necks) because they were day laborers out in the sun. And they were not easy to get along with, or desirable in your church. When, indeed, they got together with you it was usually to fight. The Red Neck church was on one side of a small park. The Beikirch church was on the other side. The park itself was a battle ground. Who, after church on Sunday morning, was going to get it for the day? Whoever got there first and fought the hardest.

Again with that twinkle in his eye, Father told me about an Irish Catholic-German Catholic incident he once observed from underneath a grand piano. One of the family females made the mistake of agreeing to marry an Irish boy.

She not only agreed, she went through with it. After the wedding, there was a reception given at the girl's parents' home. The Germans showed up with plenty of beer. The Irish showed up with plenty of whisky. My father showed up to sing for the assembled guests. It was while he was singing that it happened. Upstairs some of the German male guests had found a thunder mug.¹ They filled it with beer, put a donut in it. As my father sang (and he had a fine voice) one of the Germans handed the mug to an Irishman and invited him to propose a toast to the bride and groom. The Irishman did not take the matter lightly, nor did he make a toast. He threw the brew in that German face and brouhaha erupted. My father, who was neither very pugnacious nor very old at the time, chose to take refuge under the grand piano by which he had been standing, singing his heart out.

TIP MY HAT. Great-grandfather Beikirch's church building efforts did not promote widespread Catholic brotherhood and tranquility in the Rochester community. But then he probably would not have really understood that if it had. My father told me on several occasions how delighted his grandfather was with what he found in America. Johann Beikirch chose to become a full-fledged American. Among other things, he would not permit German to be spoken at home. They were Americans. They would talk American. But there was a problem. Grandfather Beikirch told my father many times that there was one thing wrong with America: "When I walk down the street," he said, "I don't know to whom I should tip my hat, or who should tip his hat to me." Somehow Great-grandfather Beikirch's world of German authoritarianism never quite drowned in the "wonders of democracy".

WHISTLER'S MOTHER. What can I say about Grandmother Tremmel? I only saw her for a little while a long, long time ago. I can say, as I vividly remember, that she was Whistler's Mother with a different style bonnet--one with a shorter brim. I remember her sitting on the porch, rocking in that chair. And that is almost all I remember, except that she was nice, with a warm smile, but was not a cuddler type. She liked me, but I do not remember that she ever hugged me. But then, of course, I was almost old enough to start school. Time to grow up.

MONKEY BUSINESS. What else do I remember? I remember Niagara Falls. And I remember visiting with a cousin named Loretta, Uncle Joseph's daughter. Loretta lived in a two story house. One day we heard music being played outside. We looked out the second story window. There was an organ grinder with a monkey down there. Loretta, or somebody, opened the window and the monkey came up the side of the house, cap in hand. Somebody put some money in the cap and away he went.

It's a bit odd what you remember along the way, but rather precious.

¹If you do not know what is a thunder mug, ask any senior citizen, or if you can find a really old house, go upstairs and check under the beds.