

Wednesday, May 20, 1992.

Dear family,

Ready for another epistle? Es and I went to Bay City yesterday to visit Helen and also visited cousin of ours. She is a daughter of my Dad's half brother and 82. She gave me a lot of family history which I will save for a later time. I want to see my sister Edith and get from her what she remembers. She (this Alice) tells me there were 7 siblings with the first Mom and 3 with the second. The story told to me yesterday said that my Dad's mother was adopted into the family and when his wife died, he married her! She was like 40 years younger and the youngest (one below my Dad) was born when he was 74 years old! I was told that Dzia-dzia Z came over to America first with some of the older kids and when he had enough money saved, the second half of the family came over. I did get names and as soon as I'm relatively sure my information is correct, I'll send on the family tree. Get this! Those 7 first siblings had between 10 and 13 children each! No wonder there are so many Zielinskis in the phone book. The Polish apparently are a prolific lot!

Today I thought I would share with you some of my earliest memories in life. I do remember my first day in school but nothing before that and the only reason I remember that is because it had to do with my first lie. I had a new dress (probably the first in life as all the cast downs were worn by each of us) and I told my Mom the teacher said that it was the prettiest dress she had ever seen. She said absolutely nothing like that but when Mom asked how things went, I told that lie. It haunts me to this day. Why else would I remember?

Kindergarten I spent in the public school. We had crayons and paper and I was in my glory. We never had anything other than penny pencils and tablet paper at home---and not much of that. First and second grade I spent at St. Stan. You had to for preparing for communion. You were supposed to pay tuition (25 cents each marking period) or you did not get your report card. We did not have the money! I could not turn in my card for the next marking period. When the next report came out, I would sneak mine from the desk and pretend that I had just gotten it. Here I was a Z, the very last letter and I believed no one would notice! How humiliating! Was I surprised at the end of the school year when my name was called to give the final report and promotion to the next grade! Somebody up there loved me! Lucky for me I had books from my siblings or I would have been minus books, too. We had to supply pencil and paper and I was constantly borrowing from other children. Back to public school from then on where books and paper were free. Pencils you had to provide for yourself so I was borrowing again.

Are you shouting, "How poor were you?" Poor enough so that none of us had warm enough clothes, boots or mittens to wear in that cold. When shoes needed resoling, you put cardboard or newspaper in them. I remember my 4th grade teacher bought me a pair of shoes once----beautiful ones, not practical but very pretty in patent leather. Good ole Miss Green!

Mom had a poor understanding about a lot of things. We were supposed to read library books but she would not allow us to have cards. Finally I went behind her back and got one and hid the books. When you read a book, you gave a report aloud. I used to give the same book, the same part someone else did until one time the teacher said that she was tired of hearing the same part of the story and, of course, not knowing the book, I said words to the effect that I wouldn't remember any other part. That was when I defied my Mom and got the card. She said that I could not belong to scouts or girl reserves because they were not for Catholics. I don't know how my siblings managed to get around Mom as we all had the same rules. Mom got interested in the PTA and attended meetings so she must have learned that library cards and school activity was good for you so I did not have to sneak around anymore. I was an avid reader and frequented the library. In those days you could only take 4 books out and I went through those quickly. The library was a good mile and a half away and I devised a system; walk a block, skip a block, and run one. That got me there a lot quicker. Summer days, I would walk as a form of recreation. Most of the girls I went with then, had little interest in reading so that I usually did this alone.

When I was in the 6th grade, I won a contest! We were studying teeth and the project had to do with writing a play, poem, or whatever. This was a city wide affair and I got 1st prize! I wrote a play about Mr. Tooth Decay and stressed the importance of brushing. For this I got a whole \$2 and one of it I was allowed to keep. I remember going to town and buying a dress-----yes, you could get one for a dollar in those days. The school was pretty proud and we had a special assembly in which I became aware that I was the big winner. Boy was I proud! For once I did not feel like a second class citizen. Best of all, the teachers took notice of me and gave me special things to do. My marks were good so that I often helped kids less endowed. I skipped the rest of 6th grade and was promoted to 7B (half year) and as a result I graduated in January instead of June when I finished high school. Math and grammar came very easily to me and that made a big difference in my attitude toward life. It is hard to live down being poor but you don't have to put pride in your pocket if others take notice and ask you for help. Boy, what an ego boost!

Two things I must share with you before I leave those early days. One had to do with making soap and the other with Edith's bribery to get me to go with her to the outside toilet at night. Edie got married when I was 10 so I must have been very young. Anyway she was afraid to go herself so she would tell me that if I went with her, she would tell me about Xmas and how we would have a big tree and presents. (Actually we didn't have that tree until Es got to work and boy! was that a celebration!) I fell for it every time. What child is not fascinated with Xmas? I loved hearing about it even if it didn't materialize. We had no light outside so we would crumple and twist a newspaper and light it when we got to the outhouse. This meant you had to do your business in a hurry or you soon were in the dark. I was rather fascinated by the dark and wanted all the story I could get. Edie would want to come in as soon as possible.

Mom made our soap. You may know that soap is made of lye and lard. We had a big copper kettle that used to heat our wash water atop the wood stove. For making soap, about one third of the kettle was filled with water, large chunks of fat were added and then when this melted down, a can of lye was added. The mixture was stirred with a large wooden paddle many times while this mess cooked. I don't know how long Mom cooked it, but it had to cool gradually and the soap would float to the top. When the stuff was solid, she would cut it in square, lift it out and put it in a box. There always was a liquid residue at the bottom that must have been poured down the outdoor toilet. With that much lye in the formula, I presume there was a caustic residue which had to be removed carefully. What better place than an outdoor, smelly toilet, eh? Mom made soap for many years. Dad having worked in the meat market, could have lots of discarded fat so it was a cheap way to do. It was laundry soap but we used it to wash ourselves and even brush our teeth. Who could afford tooth paste?

Been a few interruptions with this letter so I am not sure how coordinated I am in the text. Now it's time to get dinner so there will be more at a later time. Next I could go into junior and senior high school days. It was vastly different than you kids experienced, for sure!

Dad and I send our love,

Mom

Just got films developed. These snaps go back a ways, eh?