

# MY PHILMONT

BY JOE HAAG. **PART ONE.** INTRODUCTION BY EILEEN ORDU

**JOE HAAG WALKS TO THE POST OFFICE ALMOST EVERY DAY. HE WALKS ALONG THE RESERVOIR AND DOWN STEEP LUMBER STREET (HE STILL CALLS IT THAT), ACROSS MAIN AND BACK UP AGAIN, ABOUT A MILE. HIS FEET KNOW THE WAY, AND IT'S NO WONDER. JOE IS 81 AND HE'S LIVED IN PHILMONT ALL HIS LIFE, BORN IN THE SAME NEAT BROWN HOUSE UP ON THE RESERVOIR, WHERE HE AND HIS WIFE, IRMA, RAISED THEIR SEVEN CHILDREN. JOE AND IRMA STILL LIVE IN THAT HOUSE.**

**JOE'S AN OUTDOOR MAN. SAYS HE FEELS BEST WHEN HE'S OUT IN NATURE, SWINGING HIS LEGS. SAYS THAT IF PEOPLE GOT THEIR DRIVING RODS A-GOING MORE OFTEN— THAT IS, IF THEY WALKED MORE—THEY'D SEE THE DOCTOR LESS. JOE STILL GROWS VEGETABLES IN HIS GARDEN AND STILL CANS HIS OWN TOMATOES. HE WEARS A BLUE FLANNEL SHIRT AND THICK BLACK SUSPENDERS, WORN SNEAKERS AND A NEWISH FISHING CAP. THE BRIM RESTS ON THICK LENSES WHICH MAGNIFY JOE'S BUSHY BROWS, LARGE RHEUMY BLUE EYES, AND STUBBLED CHEEKS.**

**JOE'S A THINKING MAN. GET HIM TALKING POLITICS AND YOU'RE IN FOR AN EARFUL. BUT MOST OF WHAT HE SAYS IS OFF THE RECORD, SO YOU'LL HAVE TO ASK HIM YOURSELF. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PHILMONT THEN AND PHILMONT NOW? "NIGHT AND DAY."**

**JOE AND HIS BROTHER JIM WERE "STAND-OUT TWINS," THE ONLY IDENTICAL TWINS IN**

**PHILMONT WHEN THEY WERE GROWING UP. TO MOST OF US, LUMBER STREET IS NOW SUMMIT STREET, AND THE MILLS, WHERE JOE AND BOTH OF HIS PARENTS WORKED, ARE GONE, ALONG WITH JOE'S SCHOOL, THE MOVIE HOUSE, THE GAZEBOS, AND THE CRUSADER CLUB. AND JIM, WHO DIED A YEAR OR SO AGO, HAVING WORKED ON THE RAILROAD UNTIL HE RETIRED. BUT IT'S ALL STILL THERE, IN JOE'S JOURNAL.**

**AH YES, HE REMEMBERS IT WELL.**

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*I remember my mother putting dresses on us, which was the custom.*

*I remember an outdoor toilet.* No electric lights, no washing machine, no hot water, no refrigerator. We had kerosene lamps for light. For heat, we had a coal and wood stove in the kitchen and living room, and an oil stove in the kitchen to cook on. We had cold running water, but no bath tub, so if you wanted to take a bath, you got the washtub out and took a bath in the kitchen.

*I remember our first radio.* My brother Bob would lie on the couch with earphones on his ears and I couldn't figure out why. I didn't know what a radio was. One afternoon, we got a bad thunderstorm and lightning struck the aerial wire Pa had hooked up to the radio. It burned the shingles off the roof and burned out the radio. Ma hollered "Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" She thought Jim got struck by the lightning. He didn't, but that was the end of the radio.

*I remember a boy drowning up at the railroad bridge.* We had had a shower that afternoon and the creek was high and there was a current. The news got around fast and people gathered up around the reservoir to see what had happened. Between Pa and Bob, they got him out of the water and into the boat, but he was already dead. Before my time, on the northwest side of the abutment, a father and son drowned, locked in each other's arms.

*I remember a Ford getting hit by a*

*train down at Stever's Crossing in '27 or '28.* My grandfather would never ride in a car over that crossing and my uncle John would have to stop the car so Grandpa could get out and walk across.

*I remember a one-car passenger train with its own built-in engine.* We called it the Tunerville Trolley. It made two trips a day between New York City and Chatham (about a three-and-a-half hour trip) and arrived in Philmont at 3:15 pm. We got out of school each day just before then and most days we would hear that train blowing its whistle as it pulled into the station. One day, we heard it back its way down, so we all took off down to the tracks to Stever's Crossing, where a man had just been killed. The top of his head had been cut off and his arms and legs were bent around and he was already covered with flies. It didn't bother me any at all to see it.

*I remember Uncle John taking us down to Copake Lake in the Model T Ford.* It was tar road all the way to Craryville, but from Craryville on, it was dirt. It would take us a good hour. Grandpa would ride in the front seat smoking a clay pipe and Jim or me would ride on his lap.

Uncle John and Jim and me would take the boat over around the Island of Paradise, which everyone called Jew Island. It was a great summer resort with an orchestra and dancing and people dressed up in their best clothes—a paradise in every way. The nice soft music flowed out over the lake. Jim and me would take turns going ashore, until the cop ran us off.

*I remember my grandfather coming home from work, down along the reservoir with his railroad clothes on and a lunch pail in his hand.* He worked as a section hand, keeping up the railbed, laying new ties and rails.

*I remember Prohibition.* One day, there was a padlock on the door of the hotel (the present Vanderbilt Inn). I asked Pa why, and he said it was against the law to sell drink. Well, in back of the hotel, there was a shed and I would see men go in there. All I knew was they called it The Pig's Ear. One Sunday, John took Jim and me inside. It was dark except for the lamps on the walls. It had no windows and the walls were covered with old carpet, even the ceiling.

Another day, John took Jim and

me on a walk to High Falls, and we saw an old man sitting by a fire with a heavy coat on and a hat, stoking and feeding the fire. Over the fire was a boiler, and I couldn't figure out why a man would be sitting by a fire in a hat and coat out in the hot sun. I found out later he was making whiskey. It wasn't legal to be making booze, but there were plenty of people making it. Pa, Grandpa and John made beer in the living room. They made wine too—dandelion, elderberry, grape. Not all of Pa's wines were good.

Pa, Jim and me would pick apples wherever we could get them for nothing and take them to Martindale, to the Barton Cider Mill. Mr. Barton wore overalls that were dirty enough to stand up by themselves, and he had dirty-looking teeth. The mill was dark and gloomy with a dirt-caked concrete floor and the apples in the bin were wormy. The juice coming out of the press was cloudy and dark brown. Mr. Barton took a dipper off the wall and all of us drank the good sweet cider out of the same dipper, and it sure tasted good. Then we would put barrels in Pa's car, and keep them in the cellar for a month, until the cider was hard.

*I remember the Great Depression.*

I was standing in the kitchen when Pa looked down at me and said, "Wall Street crashed today." I could tell that he was very worried and wanted me to understand what had happened.

Pa would work for a while and then be laid off, and many mills went out of business. Considering that we had food to eat, we were blessed. The people of today don't know what hard times are. I know one man the same age as me. When he was a boy, a bunch of blackbirds landed in their yard, so he grabbed a double-barrel shotgun and killed about forty birds with one shot. A couple of hours later, they were on the table, their first meal in three days.

This may seem a crazy question to ask myself, but I ask it anyway. Would I rather see another World War II or another Great Depression? I don't know. And why they called it the Great Depression, I don't know either. I didn't see anything great in it. But when the war ended, this country went into a golden age.

*I remember Christmas.* Pa knew the farmer who had the farm up in back of the Catholic cemetery and he would walk up there and cut a white pine. At first, we never had lights,

just candles. The mill shut down from Christmas till New Year's, and the workers went without pay, but it meant Pa would be home with us.

My half-brothers Bob and Eddie would come home and buy us candy and nuts. Toys were out of the picture, but we enjoyed the carols on the radio, we had enough to eat, and we were warm in the house. Most kids fared about the same as Jim and me, some worse. Santa came to the village square and all the kids would be there to get an orange.

*I remember Winter.* The reservoir was our winter playground. There would be a hundred kids or more on the ice all day, and if it was thick enough, the men would be cleaning it off and getting it ready to cut and put into the ice houses. The boys would make fires along the shore and play hockey. The hill across the reservoir was a cow pasture without trees. We would sled straight down that hill and out across the ice. There was one way you could go down that was so fast, I'd end up alongside my house.

*I remember the Ku Klux Klan.* One of my earliest memories is of the KKK around the time Al Smith was running for president. There was a lot of hatred and the Klan was strong in Philmont. Once, Pa had me by the

hand and over across the reservoir up on the hill, there was a cross burning and I said, "See that fire?" and he said back to me, "Don't look at it." It doesn't seem possible now that the KKK was in Philmont, but it was. They held their meetings up at the back of the Catholic cemetery. .

*I remember bullfrogs, turtles, cranes, beavers and snakes.* Bullfrogs were plentiful along the banks of the reservoir and after dark, it was nice to hear them singing. Up in the swamp were plenty of green turtles too. In the summer, they would be out there sunbathing on a log. There were snapping turtles too, but in all my time, if I seen a dozen, that would be the most. The biggest one I ever saw was two feet across.

There were two types of cranes: gray and white, and they'd listen to the bullfrogs. And for several years, there were a couple of beavers who built a home just west of the railroad bridge. And there were plenty of black snakes. We would take the boat up to the bridge just to see them. A black snake is a beautiful snake to see. There was no way to get to them, but I remember them looking back at us.

*I remember our farm.* Pa worked a small farm and kept a large garden in back of the house, so even in the win-

ter we always had apples and cabbage, carrots, beets and onions in the cellar. We kept wet sand on the cellar floor to keep the carrots and beets fresh.

*I remember 35 cents a bushel for a field of potatoes, all dug up and bagged.* They were good potatoes and some people felt sorry for Pa and gave him 50 cents. There was plenty of food, but who had the money to buy it?

*I remember sauerkraut.* In the fall, Pa would take cabbage and salt it down in a crock. Green string beans as well, and corn off the cob. It was a German way of preparing food for the winter and it was good eating.

*I remember Ma putting up canned goods.* Pickles, tomatoes, beans, peaches, plums, pears and elderberries, which made good pies. And white beans and kidney beans. On Sunday, we had popcorn from Pa's corn.

*I remember unpasteurized milk.* We got our milk from a farmer who kept his cows in a barn next to the ice houses in the wintertime. Pa would get a pint each day, and sometimes a quart. We used it for cooking and in coffee. It was a treat to get a whole glass.

*I remember drinking coffee at age*

*three or four.* Coffee was cheap, about 10 cents a pound. We had a cup for breakfast and dinner, and tea at supper. Soda was out because we had no money to buy it. I would say it's better to give a kid coffee than soda anyway.

*I remember brown eggs.* Pa had chickens, so we had eggs. We had a Rhode Island hen that laid brown eggs and I still like a brown egg better than a white egg.

*I remember chicken.* Jim and me never liked to eat chicken. I think what turned us off to it was the way my mother used to clean the chicken and stink up the whole house. I didn't eat bird meat until I got on a merchant marine ship in World War II and I had to learn to eat it or go hungry. Jim never did. .

*I remember the first of April.* The men would all come to the reservoir to go trout fishing. We'd bring potatoes with us, start a fire, bake the potatoes and eat them. There was no bass, but there was plenty of trout, and socker, bullhead, sunfish, and shiners, which were good for bait. You could look down into the water and see the trout, but they were wiser than the fishermen and hard to catch. As time went on, bass took over. How they got in there, I don't know.

