WOODY AND CASSY’S JOURNAL

WWII AND OTHER DARK SHADOWS

By James McKenzie
“Everyone lives twice,” poet Thomas McGrath used to say, explaining his methods in *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, “once in private and again in history.” He included in that epic poem those episodes of his life where he felt the threads of private autobiography intersected with the larger forces of public history.

A much more modest urge underlies the little journal my mother passed along to me after my father’s death in 1980. “We thought it might be interesting to us and our children later on,” she wrote in the opening paragraph. My father’s claims were even more restrained: “Events in our household and day to day occurrences” is how his initial entry characterizes what they planned to record. Much of what follows, in some 18 hand-written notebook pages, is quite domestic: details of a shopping trip, the comings and goings of family members, a record of my sister’s whooping cough and diphtheria shots.

Still, despite my parents’ understated claims, the journal manifests an awareness of the larger sweep of history in several ways. Both parents — each took turns writing entries — mention the unfolding war in their opening remarks. World War II casts a lengthening shadow over the whole of it, darkening even mundane events: routine shopping accounts refer to shortages and ration books; some of the comings and goings are soldiers off to training and war; and family finances include the buying of defense bonds. My dad’s several predictions of the war’s outcome and other references to specific events clearly betray a more conscious eye for history. But for the intersection of the personal and the historical, it’s hard to match the final words in my mother’s hand. Writing on August 31, 1942, she again worried about a new draft call: “It is so hard to think of breaking up a family.”

Besides what it reveals of wartime life, the journal also sheds light on Monongahela Valley steelworker families. Much has been written on the subject by others, but the journal gives the flavor of a particular voice to that group. Both my parents came from families that moved to the region early in the 20th century to work in the mills. I grew up hearing stories of how Grandpap Finsinger, a carpenter, lived in a boxcar, washing his clothes in the Monongahela River and drying them on shrubs while building the American Steel and Wire plant in Donora; how he worked his way up to Carpentry and Pattern Maker foreman, even driving his Model T through strikers’ picket lines at the Eighth Street gate, intent on keeping the plant open, scattering workers as bricks flew; only to be forcibly retired, at 56 and without a pension, during the Depression, exaggerating an injury to collect disability.

Most of his children and many family members also worked in that mill at one time or another. In the end, the mill also accelerated his death; though he was not counted among the 20 official deaths attributed to the great Donora smog disaster of October 1948, many close to him blamed the killer smog for his death by cerebral hemorrhage, at 73, that November 18. My mother remembers riding the bus over from Monessen to care for him during the smog, and how her mother stuffed rags into the cracks of windows and doors to keep the orange smoke out. “She used her head,” mother told me. “She wasn’t very educated but she knew what to do.”

The McKenzies of Monessen were also a multi-generational family of steelworkers. Grandfather Jerry McKenzie, along with one brother, John, came to Monessen from rural Ohio in 1905 to work at Page Steel. After transferring to Pittsburgh Steel in 1914, he worked his way up to foreman before retiring in 1949. He married Elizabeth Betts of Gallatin in 1907. Her father by then labored in
Monessen's nail mill, after years of chasing work around southwestern Pennsylvania coal patches — living in 27 different places in nine years. Grandmother McKenzie was working at Hooper and Long's shoe store in Monessen when she met Jerry, and worked in other ways for much of her life, taking in millworkers as boarders in the family home to make ends meet.

Like the Finsingers, too, the next generation of McKenzies all “went down to the mill,” as my father used to put it, though the youngest, Bud, worked there only a short time in the open hearth. Estelle did office work at Pittsburgh Steel until the Depression; Johnny, a worker on the mill railroad who dies in the course of the journal; and my father, James, worked there 48 years — 46 of them at the same job in the metallurgy lab — until his retirement in 1977.

Three years later, sitting on the linoleum outside the downstairs hall closet of their Donora home and surrounded by little piles of Dad’s personal effects, my mother read the journal again for the first time in decades. Then she handed it to me, remarking quietly about what had been “left out.”

Neither of us chose to speak of what she was referring to, but we both knew it had to do with the alcohol and violence that so marred our family life (there were eventually nine children) throughout the 1940s and '50s, a subject I'll return to in the postscript. What follows is an edited version of the journal, excerpted to especially include intersections of private and public life like those that McGrath referred to, while still keeping the flavor of this particular family at that time in its life. My excisions to the journal have been light — a few hundred words — consisting of only the most mundane, domestic, and repetitious family events.
Note: My father’s writing is reproduced here in black; my mother’s is in blue as seen in the initial entry.

On Sunday April 26th, 1942 while listening to the 10th Anniversary Program of “One Man’s Family” we decided to keep a diary of events happening in our little family. You see, it came out that Mother Barbour kept a diary of their family events and we thought it might be interesting to us and our children later on if we did the same. This notebook was my college notebook, and the paper was purchased for Woody’s notebook but it didn’t fit—so with a handy notebook and paper we started.

Perhaps we had better give the status of events to date. We are living in the second floor of 14 McKee Ave. just around the corner from the senior McKenzies. We have 2 children—Jimmy, age 20 months and Lois Ann, age 2 months. Our earning power reaches $191 per month—prices are high due to the entry of U.S.A. in this Second World War (Dec. 7, 1941), but we manage very nicely but find it necessary to avoid luxuries. So far our marriage has been a very successful marriage.

We are attempting to do our part in this war by buying defense stamps. We have pledged $1.00 per week and of course intend to buy as many more as possible. Also—we put away $8.00 a month for gas and electric. Whatever is left from that sum when the utilities are paid is put into defense stamps. We just bought Jimmy a $25 Defense Bond with the money that has collected in his bank since he was born. We figure that 10 years from now it may come in handy to buy him a coat or suit.

In the Finsinger family the situation is this: Mom & Pop Finsinger are living alone at 65 Castner Ave. in Donora. Alma (42) and Cyril Zeller also live in Donora. Alma is the eldest daughter of my father to his first wife. Mary Finsinger Stofko (the second daughter to my father by his first wife) has just buried her husband Jack, who died April 21, 1942 at the age of 39. Mary is widowed at 38 with 2 children—Greg 12 and Mary Catherine 4. Ann Finsinger Kelly is in the hospital and has, today, lost her second baby in 9 months time. Ann is 32. Joe Finsinger, 30, lives in Bridgeport Conn. with his wife Kay and year old daughter Deirdre. I am the youngest of the family—age 27.

C. McK.

Ann & Dick Kelly just moved into the home they built in Marymount (6 mi. outside of Wilkinsburg) yesterday.

Now that this little notebook is to be filled with the events in our household and day to day occurrences that take place in our household, I, the father and husband might mention the status of the McKenzie family tree.

Catherine and I have been married since Nov. 24th 1938. It has been a very happy marriage and we are looking and planning as much as in our power to make it always be.

Mother 54 and Dad 60 yrs. are living at 223 First St. just around the corner, and have been for 27 yrs. where I was raised. Dad is working at Pittsburgh Steel—also I am employed there. Estelle age 33, is working at Nahi’s shoe store after living at
home and out of work the last 10 years. John, 25, my brother, has been married since Nov. 27 (Thanksgiving day) to Nell and are expecting a blessed event in six months. They occupy the third floor above mom. Buddy, 20, the youngest of the 3 sons is working at Curtiss Wright Aircraft in Buffalo, N.Y. for the past 16 months. He was home March 2 when Lois Ann was baptised and he and Estelle stood for her. Bud usually comes home on holidays. In the near future we expect him to be called into Uncle Sam’s forces.

Estelle is dating Paul Swade, who now is enlisted in the marine forces and is waiting a telegram to be placed in a center.

In order to provide and defray expenses and save a little each month I started rolling Bugler tobacco in Jan. 1941. and have kept at it ever since.

While writing this Lois Ann, the sweet child wanted her pants changed. Mommy changed them.

Our Country is at war with Japan and Germany and what the outcome is we all know, but how it is going to effect each and every one of us is not known.

Monday 4-27-42

Woody is working 12-8. He has 7 in a row. We always count how many more nights to go. Just 3 more. This is wash day and boy do I keep busy. The week has been uneventful.

Wed. 4-29-42

This is pay day. We always divide the money in envelopes for the various expenses. There are 2 months out of the year with 3 pays. This is one of them. This always gives us a little over and above our budget so that we can buy a few extras that come up. This time it is clothing for Woody & I and insurance and a bed for Lois Ann.

Thurs. 4-30-42

We celebrate when Woody came home this morning. 12-8’s are over. He’s off until Monday. He closed up the dining room grate and worked in his flower bed today.

Friday 5-1-42

Woody went up street and bought a pair of shoes & trousers. He didn’t have anything decent to wear for spring & summer. Due to the war, all trousers come without cuffs and tailors are forbidden to put cuffs on them. There was plenty of material for cuffs so I put cuffs on them.

Sat. 5-2-42

I keep Woody busy running about doing the shopping. I really can’t do it as I’m so busy with my babies. He does very well — knows all the prices etc. The folks downstairs Virginia & Bill Merritt and daughters Fay 3 and Carol 1 moved yesterday and today. Dorothy & Bill Kitto and daughter Carol 18 mo. moved in. They are very nice and I know it will be nice for me. Dorothy and I should enjoy each other’s company as we think a lot alike. Virginia and I were so different, tho we got along.

Jimmy and Lois Ann are becoming very good little pals now. When I wheel her bed from one room to another, Jimmy has to get at one end of the bed and help push. When Lois Ann drops her toys from the high chair, Jimmy picks it up for her and then tells her “Don’t drop it on the floor no more, Lois Ann.”

August 30, 1942 — Sunday

This is Jimmy’s second birthday. When he sees that I am “dressed up” in the morning, he say “Mommy goina church.” He knows that when I am dressed up I am usually going to church. Buddy was home and came over and had breakfast with us. He and Jimmy played “wreck” with Jimmies trucks. Bud gave Jimmy money to buy a sweater — and did the same for Lois Ann. Uncle Bud took Jimmy to visit Cirners — they think a lot of him. He had dinner with us and little Jimmy was so sleepy he could just about stuff his birthday cake down without going to sleep. Aunt Ann gave Jimmy a cotton knit suit. Grandma and Grandpa Finsinger came over for the afternoon bringing Jimmy money for his bank and a maroon corduroy suit. Grandma McKenzie came to see him too. Uncle John and Aunt Nell brought him a Walt Disney mechanical toy — Jimmy was just getting ready for bed. He was so pleased with his toy he didn’t want to go to bed. When Lois Ann cries he say “That’s enough a that, Lois Ann.” Carol Louise Kitto gave Jimmy 3 pair of socks.
August 31, 1942
At noon today we all got dressed and went to McKenzies. Buddy wanted a picture of the entire family. Jimmy in a little blue and white suit — Lois Ann in a blue dress and little white bonnet. They looked so sweet — folks who see them on the street make remarks and smile — those who know them just rave about how sweet and healthy they look and how bright Jimmy is for his age. Tonight we went in to see if they were both sleeping o.k. Lois Ann has a tiny bassinet bed and Jimmy has a 6 yr. size crib. Lois Ann was all curled up with one leg hanging out of bed and Jimmy was sideways at the foot of the bed. How comic it looked — both of them sleeping peacefully (at) in such awkward positions. Now the war scare is hitting us. They are going to begin calling 3-A men — married men and men with dependents. We are hoping Woody is one of the ones who won’t have to go. It is hard to think of breaking up a family.

The next entry was inserted later, and those from this point on are more summary in nature.

Sept. 1, 1942
The month of August[,] Granpa Betts died at the age of 93 or 94 — and was shortly followed by his wife Mary Betts on Nov. 17, 1942. Thus the great grandparents of Jim and Lois Ann had passed away.
Dec 1942
Uncle Bud has gone to the Navy—he is doing boot training at Newport Rhode Island.

The new year found me working 12-8. This was the first New Year Cass and I weren’t together. After I had gotten to work I called her about 8 min. after the new year had come in.

Jan. 18th
Lois Ann received her first shot of whooping cough and diptheria vaccine together. 2 more will follow 4 weeks apart.

2/2/43
United States has been at war a little over a year. The government has allowed each holder of an A card 3 gallons of gas per week—the speed limit is 35 miles per hour—no pleasure driving—the only places you can drive are church, to the grocery store, to funerals.

So far we have ration book no #1 which covers sugar and coffee—sugar is 1 lb/person/week—coffee is 1 lb/person/5 weeks all over 15 years of age.

No. #2 ration book is soon to come out—this covers canned fruits, vegetables juices fish and baby food, also meat might be included—2 lbs per person/week. Some days you cannot buy meat—a person has to go from one store to another—

tea is a rare beverage—we didn’t have any for 4 weeks.

President Roosevelt on a secret mission to North Africa met Prime Minister Churchill of England at Casablanca—Morocco in North Africa. The trend of the meeting was to map the new offensive against Germany—which looks like a wave of planes is going to swoop on Germany every hour for 24 hrs. I predict, just to have something to write that Germany will be defeated in the fall of 1943 and Japan to be conquered in summer of 1945.

At the end of 1942 we had 4 million men in the armed forces—at the end of 43 they expect to have 9 million. The government has asked each employee to give 10% of his wages to war bonds. The victory tax 5% of wages is being deducted to help pay for the war. The 5% covers every thing above 624 a year salary. 25,000 is the top income after taxes have been paid (course that doesn’t concern me).

The national debt is now 116 billion and it is expected to reach 260 billions by the end of this war. By that time we will need a new monetary system. It will be a new reorganized world to live in. How it is going to affect us we will have to wait and see—one thing I believe in will be a lower standard of living.

We had scrap iron drives, paper collections, silk stockings saved for powder bags and tin cans collected—the tin cans are opened on both ends and then flattened and sent to a detinning furnace—Neville Island.
The Japs were bombed as early as April 17, 1942 by Major Doolittle and 8 or 10 other pilots. Roosevelt mentioned the base the planes came from as Shangra Li a mythical base.

I have been reclassified from 3A to 3B — married with dependents and working in an essential industry.

The income tax is really going to hit everyone this year. $500 for single and $1200 exemption for married persons — 350 for each dependent — making $2500 a year married and two children — tax will be around $100

In the department where I work (chem lab) girls are taking up where the fellows left off. We have girls drilling tests in the cellar. 2 on a turn — we have 8 girls working upstairs and 9 fellows.

2/11/43
Henry arrived 9:30 am for his first leave he was 7 days. He looked good although very tired due to staying up so long. He was very proud of his uniform and wouldn't take his hat off. He remarked about a man in a uniform and women.

Girls that wouldn't speak to him before now are anxious to say hello. He doesn't know whether it's the uniform or a shortage of men.

2/17/43
Bud went back from his leave of absence, and was transferred to Patuxent River, Maryland. It's a huge naval air station.

2/25/43
Registered for war ration Book 2 this covers canned fruits and vegetables dried fruits and dehydrated fruits and vegetables. We received 4 books — each containing 48 points per person per month. A can of tomatoes is worth 16 points — peas also, corn 14 points — juices are much higher tomato juice 32 points for 16 oz. can. This rationing starts the 1st of March — the blue stamps are for vegetables and fruits and the red stamps are for meat — when it is rationed.

Lois Ann has had her second shot for diptheria and whooping cough— she is having a tough time cutting her teeth. She has just passed her 1 year old birthday in which mommies baked a cake and had 1 candle on it needless to say she didn't get any cake.

United States troops suffered a setback in Tunisia due to inexperienced troops and lack of material and equipment by now they have checked Rommel's advance and have thrown him back.

March 15 — Uncle Sam's Day
Lois Ann had her last shot to-day no reaction for any of the three.

Brother John has had pneumonia since Tuesday the 9th — very sick. We had Father Lucas on Saturday the 13th. He received extreme unction except he didn't receive Holy Eucharist because of his vomiting. Continuously for 3 days and nights. Tuesday Father Lucas was down and gave John Holy Eucharist. Friday Father Lucas was down again.

4/28/43 [Actually March 28]
This was written after the death and burial of my brother John.

The night of March 8 John was working 4-12. So was dad. at 10:30 pm. dad wrote a hospital slip for John. He took it and instead of going to the hospital he went home.

He vomited so much that Nell (his wife) and mom called Dr. Herron 3 times — the last time around 12:30 a.m. — he refused to come and attend him — at 3 a.m. they called Dr. Kreger — he came over and tried to help him — around 4 he left. The next afternoon mom and dad called Kreger. They notified me at work John was very sick. The next day we had Dr. Herron for consultation — pneumonia was the verdict. No symptoms or anything, except John's feeling for sleeping was there any indication of sickness.

The Metropolitan nurse came every day for 9 days — when he was removed to the Charleroi Hospital.

Dad & I were working 4-12. After work we almost decided to go to see him — much to our sorrow we didn't go. Mom — Dad Nell & I sat up until 2 o'clock — at 3:10 am. the hospital called and said to hurry. He died at 3:40 a.m. We arrived at 3:48 a.m. — 8 minutes too late.

Bud and Estelle were home for the funeral.

Thus ended a friendship and love between John & me — one that I cherished very deeply.

He was buried Mar. 27 (Saturday) at St. Mary's cemetery in Monongahela.
The morning of Sept. 28th Cassy said this is the day for her blessed event. I was working 4-12 and she awakened me around 8:30. We reached the hospital at 9:50 a.m. It wasn't very long after (T.G. [Thank God]) and the new arrival was here at 10:53 a.m. a son was born. Everything went O.K. and Cassy felt pretty good. Dr. Lutz of Roscoe (Herron didn't handle deliveries a/c of too busy.

Jim & Lois Ann and I stayed at grandma McKenzie and pappap — Mother and I had our hands full for ten days. I was never so glad to have Cassy back home and running things as I was then. Even though she couldn't do very much it was a comfort to know we were together and home again.

Mom Finsinger came over and kept house for one week 14th. We were very grateful to her for staying with us. Although she was 69 she did very good. It was hard for her too and I think at the end of the week she was very glad to go home.

Ann, Cassies sister gave birth to a little girl 5/8/43 they called her Patricia Marie — she was born premature weighing around 4' 13 oz. after staying in the hospital about 1 month however she improved wonderfully. at 5 months she weighed 17 lbs. The doctor had to put her on a diet. Cass and I are the godparents of Patty Marie.

A week after Cassy had been home from the hospital she and John Francis, the new son, had the dysentery, then Jim and Lois Ann had it — and what a mess — however it was cleaned up in about 1 week.

On October 17th John Francis was christened Anthony Wiseman and his wife Catherine stood for him. There were two other babies christened. one in white, one in blue (J.F.) and one in red. Mary McNalls baby.

Ann came up to visit Cassy on the 11/19/43. I gave her a gas stamp for coming up — it is pretty tough to go anyplace out of your routine with 1 gals. of gasoline 1 week.

The war is still taking its toll of men the marines have landed in the Gilbert Islands. The solomons are in our hands and Bouganville is just about.

Cassies cousin Joe Goulas has been reported missing — he was Mach. mate 2nd C U.S.S. Denver. We sincerely hope he is alive on some island and hope he isn't a prisoner of the Japs.
A lot of fathers went last month in the armed forces and more are going this month. Some with 3, 4, and 5 children and not working in industry.

Nell and Marilyn were up for dinner the afternoon of the 11/14/43. We gave Marilyn a fork and spoon silver set. she was walking very good for 1 yr. old.

12/28/43
We have registered for book 3 and 4 since the last time I mentioned about books.

Book 3 is exhausted now and for meat. right now LMNOPQ expire Jan. 1. Book 4 is for vegetables, meat sugar and spare stamps for any commodity they care to mention. They have declared that spare stamp no. 1 in Book 4 is good for 5 pts. in pork.

We spent Xmas at home. I was off work and it made the day very supreme.

Jim and Lois Ann got up at 7:00. We also arose. I went to 7 o'clock Mass. Cassy had stockings hanging on the door between our kitchen and living room where our Xmas tree was situated. They both had such a thrill at seeing the filled stockings of chocolate, chewing gum, toy airplanes, kitchen utensils, and anything we could think of to put in the stockings. I came home from Mass with pappap McKenzie. The kids came into the room and were just stunned to see such a nice tree decorated with lights, icicles, and all.

Dad's Dec. 28, 1943, entry, together with the reference to One Man's Family that began it, serve as accidental, idealizing bookends, fairly pleading for Norman Rockwell to paint a cover, if not draw a whole suite of illustrations.

But beneath the understandable sentimentality that informs the surface of this journal lie, inevitably, darker truths, the ones my mother alluded to in the spring of 1980 when she sighed over what had been left out. Even though I had not then read the journal, I knew she was referring, in large part, to my father's alcoholism, violence, and occasional paranoia that so marked our long journey together as a family. No doubt she was also combining, as I am now, the truncated life story of that 20-month journal with a sense of the whole of their lives together.

This little gloss on their journal is not the place to explore so long and complex a story, but my father left a kind of footnote that opens a legitimate window that I want to raise a little higher. Doing so also throws light on what is arguably of greatest historical interest in the journal, the impact of World War II on Mon Valley steelworker families.

Taped to the last page of the notebook, right after the Christmas entry, are two obituaries. One, a perfunctory notice, completes a story about the Finsinger side: mother's cousin Joe Gulas, noted as missing in action in the journal, is now confirmed as killed. A little photograph of Petty Officer Gulas, clad in dress whites and smiling out from under his navy cap, accompanies the story. Cousin Joe was one of five sailors killed in a Japanese torpedo attack.

The other obituary is for dad's younger brother John. But rather than completing that narrative, his obit opens it up. It is to that story I turn to in conclusion, exploring how private autobi-
graphical knowledge might inform that intersection with public history McGrath speaks of.

John's story, too, is related to the war: I grew up hearing of everyone's remorse over how they had rejoiced when Uncle John had escaped the draft, having been classified 4-F, only to die of pneumonia and an abscessed lung a few months later. Rejected for the draft earlier in 1942 for bad teeth, he was recalled in November, as his widow remembers, "because so many boys were being killed; they needed more men." But Johnny was rejected again, this time for "emotional instability." His blood pressure was found to be dangerously high, and though they kept him at the Greensburg induction center most of the day, making him rest, then rechecking it, his pressure would not drop. "Johnny, you better lie down and die," one of his fellow millworkers said to him afterwards, "because they are taking everybody now; they're taking barflies and old men. You better lie down and die."¹

But it is dad's attempt to interpret his brother's death that is most intriguing. Scrawled at the very end of the obituary are two words in my father's hand: "even then," an obvious postscript from a backward glance he gave the newspaper clipping at some later time. It is, like the journal itself — like a variety of other scrap and note books he kept — his own attempt to observe if not "write" history. From my privileged vantage point later in time and outside of his circumstance, I think "even then" represents an expression of his vague but pervasive sense that everything was ... well, "rigged" would have been one of his words, "fixed" another. "They know what they're doing" he would roar when he had been drinking too much, "but they can't fool Woody McKenzie." An otherwise genuinely meek and gentle man, he turned abusive, sometimes violent, and often paranoid when drunk.

His worst behavior usually erupted after coming off seven nights of "12 to 8," the graveyard shift, which he worked in rotation once a month for most of his 48 years at the mill. In paranoid mode he saw the faces of American presidents cleverly hidden in the grain of workbenches in the lab, or thought his fellow workers were conspiring against him and transmitting special messages through red lights on different machines. At home, it meant checking for FBI wiretaps on the phone, accusing mother of doping the food or unrolling window blinds to prearranged positions to signal unnamed enemies. He would rail against the Church too in his delusional tirades, attributing conspiratorial motives to ordinary doctrine or selected remarks from the pulpit of Saint Charles Church. "Like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," my mother used to say of this behavior, long before I knew what those names actually referred to.²

So "even then" — for his oldest son who grew up within that history — is indistinguishable from the countless, generalized expressions of paranoia he made when in dangerous, terrifying Hyde mode. To my father it meant that even then he found evidence of some vast, unnamable conspiracy working against him; in this case, taking the life of his beloved younger brother. I can readily imagine him after some night of abuse, threats, rantings of every kind, hunched alone in his chair downstairs, radio tuned to all-night music from WWSW, reading again the account of his brother's death, and writing those two words.

Uncle John's death loomed as the most significant event in my early life and I heard the story of my father's grieving over him so many times I cannot be sure whether I remember that grieving, or just my mother's repeated telling of it: how dad reeled around our little kitchen, his face buried in his hands, moaning over and over "I'm not going to cry, I'm not going to cry, I'm not going to cry,"
lurching into the refrigerator, stumbling over table and chairs. And did not cry.

Dad was very close to Johnny. His account of his brother’s death, easily the longest episode in the journal, is also the place where his language conveys the strongest feelings. He speaks of a “friendship and love” he “cherished very deeply” and writes how, “much to our sorrow,” he and his father did not visit John in the hospital after they got off work together late that night before he died. John and Dad had lived together until my father left the family home at 28 to marry.

Both senior McKenzies drank and gambled extensively. And everyone in the family I asked about their taking in of boarders made it clear that it was Grandmother who did that, for my grandfather refused to contribute to a family budget. Some claimed he kept his entire paycheck. “Your grandmother had to take in boarders; he wouldn’t even buy a quart of milk for the family,” is how one distant relative put it.

As in many another steelworker family, fathers and sons not only worked together, but often socialized together. I have a favorite gambling story of that era, one that makes dad a kind of hero in these circumstances. One Saturday night, my grandfather Jerry lost his entire paycheck and other money at a Ukrainian Club poker game, but dad took over his hand near dawn so his father could slip away to early Mass at Saint Leonard’s. And won everything back. Another version of this story has both dad and Johnny entering the game and cleaning up.

And there was violence. I heard hushed accounts of it from my mother as often as I heard the story of dad’s suppressed grief at John’s death: how my grandfather beat my father with a barrel stave through the neighborhood streets because he had skipped out on dishes; how he chopped up his new sled, a Christmas present, over another offense; in another episode over a telephone call, dad and Johnny combined to protect Bud, but Jerry slapped his youngest son across the face anyway, demonstrating who was boss. Dad and Johnny backed off.

So my “even then” goes somewhat differently from my father’s. Even then, I can see, at the time of his death, Johnny was sick of more than the pneumonia that killed him. The “emotional instability” cited in his draft rejection fits reports of other behavior. He suffered choking fits — “spells,” mother called them; he felt he was “filling up inside,” she once explained, lifting her hands to ear level to indicate the degree of his distress. “He had to get air, so your dad and grandfather got him out of the mill. He just had to breathe.” Psychologists today might see evidence of panic disorder in these symptoms.

The same Doctor Herron my father rebukes in his journal for refusing to come to Johnny’s aid in the middle of the night had several times gone out into public places with him to help calm Johnny’s hysterics, hoping that by sitting with him, talking to him, he might ease the panic. He took Johnny to a movie once, a restaurant another time. John’s sister Estelle apparently suffered similar bouts. Like most of the rest of his family, John also drank heavily, and had smoked since he was 14 (chain smoking by the time he went to the mill); “self-medicating,” we might call such behavior now. One can only imagine how such a young man might behave under the duress of a draft physical.

No doubt his work at Pittsburgh Steel also contributed to his final illness. “He’d be roasting one minute in the open hearth, then freezing the next, out on the river bank,” his widow remembers. “His face stayed pink when he worked; you could tell when he’d been off a few days. He’d turn paler.” She recalls too his hacking and holding his side that winter before the obvious onset of pneumonia. A fellow worker, watching his gasping and afraid he’d collapse on the job, asked the boss to move him, but Johnny would have none of it. “He wanted to be a tough guy,” is how my aunt describes it, “but he was not that robust.”

The Church, too, figured in Johnny’s final days. Dad’s journal records his receiving of last rites, the concerns over whether he could swallow communion without vomiting, other visits by the assistant pastor, Father Lucas. His mother, perhaps others, made a
Woody with Johnny at their parents' house.

novena to the Infant of Prague and, after completing the ninth day's prayers, coaxed Johnny out of bed to see if the prayers had worked any miracles. Inspired, Johnny got up shakily and tried to walk around, then collapsed almost immediately back into bed.

But of all the considerations my father might have made about how and why Johnny died, nothing would have been as important to him as his own role. The feel of one's own complicity is always the deepest wound. Nothing is more poignant in everything I have learned about uncle John's death, than knowing that dad believed Johnny might have lived if only he had been able to get over to the hospital in time.

"Your dad felt that somehow with him on one side and his dad on the other, they might have been able to turn the tide," my aunt remembers, "encouraging him to fight on."

If only, such a theory might go, the hospital had called a little sooner; if only a nurse or doctor had peeked in the room earlier; if only the priest had been there, seen Johnny's peril, and called the family. The men would have rushed to Charleroi-Monessen Hospital, and, as if dealing with another, bigger, choking spell, my father and my grandfather on either side of the bed, arms looped over their dying Johnny, they would have shouted encouragements into each ear. As it was, when the call did come, it threw that complicated household into a frenzy. Jerry was so panicked (and perhaps drunk?) that he fell down several times while dressing; dad had to help him with his clothes. Father Lucas waited on the porch until all were ready to drive together to the hospital.

But of course there could be no saving of John's life. As for Jerry's absence at his dying son's side, "the one thing Johnny wanted," his widow told me, "was his father out of the room."
Thirty-seven years after his brother’s death, dying himself then of a smoker’s lung cancer, dad repeatedly said that all he wanted to do was “get through March. March is the tough one.” Those of us who knew of Johnny’s March death understood dad’s determination. Woody McKenzie died April 2, 1980.

n calling this piece “Woody and Cassy’s Journal,” I mean to honor and respect my parents’ complex love for each other: those were the familiar names by which they addressed one another, and the only ones, “Cassy” being short for Catherine, and “Woody” a nickname alluding to my dad’s red hair, as in “woodpecker.” I recognize that in the very writing of a journal they intended to pass along a legacy of some sort both to their children and, in the way of all such writing, to some undefined but no less real audience: the dispassionate gaze of history.

My father’s demonstrable interest in historical events was seriously compromised by his nagging, alcohol-heightened sense of paranoia. Though he had risen from the labor gang to the metallurgy lab through night school and had been a founding officer in his union, Dad had hoped, as a young man, not to go down to the mill. He wanted to go to college — clearly he could have, academically — but his father would not permit it. Mother, having given up teaching high school science and math after becoming pregnant with me, stopped writing in the journal a few months before discovering she was about to bear a third child, my brother they named ... John. With a family that grew to nine children (there were also four miscarriages), living on a steelworker’s income, neither one of them had the time nor, given the mounting turmoil within the family, perhaps even the inclination to reflect on daily events and the forces that shaped them.

Mother began their journal in imitation of Mother Barbour on the 10th anniversary broadcast of what has been called “the great American radio serial,” One Man’s Family.1 One marvels at their quintessentially American disregard for class in comparing themselves to the fictional Barbour’s: Henry Barbour was an affluent stockbroker who owned his own company. But by many measures of such things, my parents lives were, ultimately, successful.

Each of my parents had been born into rural — in mother’s case, peasant — families who experienced the promise and hazards of rapid, grinding, heavy industrialization. They were both strict, devout, traditional Catholics. Born near the beginning of World War I, they came to their adulthood during the Great Depression, marrying a couple of years before the outbreak of World War II. About the only advice my father ever gave that might count as “career guidance” was the oft-repeated phrase, usually roared while he was drunk and abusive: “Never go down to the mill!” He would sweep his hand violently downward as he said it, as if pushing something much larger than the mill away. Like his youngest brother Henry (Bud) who quickly got out, none of his children went down to the mill. All of us are living lives that, if not those of the fictional Barbour’s, still made both of our parents happy before they died.

The final word goes to Uncle Bud. When I interviewed him almost two decades ago, he emphasized how close he and Johnny had been, especially in the context of their father’s behavior. Each had the same nickname for the other, “Boomer,” from a character on Fibber McGee and Molly. The other thing Johnny had most wanted that night he lay dying was to see Boomer again. The expression of that wish was how his wife knew he believed he was dying.

But it was not to be. Having enlisted in the Navy in December 1942, Bud had just been transferred to Patuxent Naval Air Station and could not get home. He arrived after Johnny had been laid out
for visitation in the front room at 223 First Street in Monessen. "I said my good-byes to Boomer there," he said, "and cracked up." About that time, he recalled, an air raid warden rapped on their door, interrupting their grieving, to make them turn off the lights in front of the casket. Finishing this story, Uncle Bud looked up at me, shrugged his shoulders, and snickered. "Oh, everything's rigged anyway, Jimmy," he said. He was not teasing. 

What could I say? 

Since 1971, James McKenzie has taught English at the University of North Dakota where he also directs the annual UND Writers Conference. He is proud to share his father's name and trusts that Woody and Cassy would understand, even come to appreciate, the uses to which he has put this little journal they kept together in those uncertain, unsettling, early months of World War II.

My father escaped the draft because of his critical job in a vital defense industry, though several fellow workers as well as relatives reported that his boss made it clear to him that he too would go if he did not contribute enough to the bond drives. Dad proudly wore, then saved, his Army-Navy "E" pin, for "excellence in war production," awarded Feb. 13, 1943.

My father never drank again after an involuntary commitment to Saint Francis General's Psychiatric Hospital, Dec. 8-23, 1961. His paranoid and other behaviors were markedly diminished for the rest of his life.

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