Bill Keyser’s Path to Cabinetry, Perrysville

Bill Keyser closed his cabinet shop behind his Perrysville home in 2008, when he was 102 years old. Three years later, at age 105, he told me a story about his family overcoming adversity.

In 1911, Bill’s father, Alfonse Keyser, grabbed a train each day from Swissvale to Wilmerding to work as a plumber at Westinghouse Air Brake. Bill recalls,

They were remodeling the station in Wilmerding, and had temporary platforms. Maybe there was a loose plank, and he went headlong underneath the train. He lay across the tracks on his stomach, and pulled himself around, but the train ran over his legs. He asked to be taken to [nearby] Columbia Hospital, but they said they had to take him to Allegheny General Hospital where the railroad doctors worked. They doubled up what was left of his legs, and put him on a stretcher on a train that stopped at every station between Wilmerding and Pittsburgh.

Late that night, surgeons sewed up the one leg below the knee, and wanted to take the other one above the knee, but Alfonse asked that it not be done so he could have a longer attachment for artificial legs. “They just folded it up and taped it,” Bill remembers. “In the morning the doctors came in and said ‘Are you still living?’ and took him into the operating room to work on the shorter leg.” Gangrene had set in and every morning they would cut off the infected tissue.

Alfonse Keyser attempted to negotiate with the railroad....

He asked for a job with the railroad to take care of the restrooms at the stations ... but they refused, so he sued them, but all he got was his hospital expenses and his first pair of wooden legs about five years later. Until then, he was walking on carpet pads with little short crutches or like a dog on his hands and knees.

Through the kindness of neighbors and friends, and their own resilience, the Keyser family survived. The family moved back to their original North Side neighborhood of Manchester, where John Kress, an undertaker and old school friend of Mr. Keyser, was the first to step forward. Kress had a farm on
Peebles Road where he had built a new cottage for his family, but the old homestead was still standing. Bill recalls that Kress told his father, “Why don’t you go out there, Al, on the farm? If you want to get a cow, my brother Ed lives in a house there, and he’ll milk the cow, and you get yourself chickens, and Ed will plow up a garden, and you can take care of it.” Alfonse did, on his hands and knees. The Keyser family moved to the farm. Kress would hook up his horse to a buggy or a sleigh, and took the Keyser family into Perrysville for their shopping.

Bill Keyser recalled that Bill Heid, owner of the general store in Perrysville, also offered to help his dad, who knew plumbing:

“I’m building a house in Perrysville, and it’s the first house in Perrysville that will have indoor plumbing. Would you be able to do that job for us?” When Dad said he had no way to get in there, Mr. Heid said, “I’ll fix up a wagon with hay in it for Mr. Kress’ barn, and bring it out and deliver the hay, and then hook it up for you to drive back in the next morning, and you can come here.” Dad took me out of school—and he and I did the plumbing. The house is still here on the Perry Highway.

When they finished that job, Bill’s father opened a plumbing business across the street from St. Teresa’s church in Perrysville and moved into an apartment above the shop. “When I was 11, I didn’t go to school any more,” Bill says. “I pulled my dad in a Sears Roebucks wagon to go to work. He sat on the wagon with the tools between his legs, sometimes as far as where Sheetz’s is on the Perry Highway. It was all plank road. I did this for two years. In the winter, I borrowed a sled from my neighbor.”

After two years, the Keysers bought a secondhand Ford pickup truck. Bill, 13, was allowed to drive under special permit with his father present. At 15, he got a job with Mr. Heid, mixing concrete.

Despite the hardscrabble life, from age 14, Bill Keyser found time to dance. “Dancing was my life! I went to the Regina Sexton Dance School in Bellevue and above the Kenyon Theater on Federal Street on the North Side, then later to the Mamie Barth Dance School. I liked to fox trot and to waltz.” And that’s not all… “I took my drink everyday, either a highball, Manhattan, or a drink of wine. I grew up during Prohibition, and that’s when everyone had something to drink.”

Bill’s education stopped at age 11 but he started night school at Carnegie Tech, taking up carpentry and cabinet making. By age 19, Bill had his own general contracting business. “I had five men working for me, building houses in Perrysville. The day I got married to Margaret Wessel was the happiest day of my life, June 25, 1931, but the banks started to close right then.” A decade later, during WWII, Bill’s company had to switch direction like so many others, ultimately building 350 assault and pontoon boats, plus toolboxes and shipping crates. After the war, Bill started his cabinet shop on Brandt Street behind his house, and at 62 retired. But as anyone who has “retired” knows, that meant working there in his spare time another four decades, carrying on the tradition of hard work learned from his father.

Bette McDevitt is a regular contributor to Western Pennsylvania History. Her mother taught dancing above the Kenyon Theater where Bill Keyser used to dance. Perhaps they were partners. Bill Keyser lives at the Haven in Ross and would love to have visitors.