

Rice Family Chronicles

When farming was the topic at the family table - the table wrought the fruit of the farm and the fruit of the farm bought the table and all other family essentials. The Rice family table in Wilbraham was set for 10 in the 1930's.

The smallest of eight children, Jesse Lee Rice was born to Dora and Lee Rice on August 11, 1919 at the "Ludlow Hospital." He came home to roost on the family homestead and farm on Main Street where he has lived and farmed for 89 years. As the single survivor of the original Rice clan, he is the last to share depression era stories.

There is a wren –a small brown songbird sounding off in the distance, just outside the kitchen window, while Jesse practices the fine art of reminiscence. Two kitchen clocks observed our time together: one by the window overlooking the farm stand was a jumble of out- of -order numbers piled on top of each other with a caption that read: I'm retired who cares? The second clock, a farmer's clock, was divided into 7 pie wedges - each for a day of the week with 3 tidings on each day: 6 A.M., 12 noon and 6 P.M. Today's clock read Saturday (July 12) somewhere between 2 and 3 P.M. Jesse has just finished 2 hours of mowing.

"I pretty near got killed one day." Jesse begins. "Dad bought a four-wheel drive Massey Harris tractor in 1934 that was short-lived. My brother, Lee, and I used it to spray in the orchard. The spray machine had a hydraulic machine pump and a spray train with 8 nozzles. Now, I had sprayed about 50 times ahead of [it] and I was coming down the grade on the tractor. The tractor engine was totally in front of the front wheels and the rear wheels pivoted. Gravity took over and pulled the nose of the tractor down. The back axle caught my raincoat between the seat and the axle. I had to wait until the tractor stopped before I could jump off. Don't you ever ask me to drive that tractor again." he said to Lee.

"Back in the late 30's we harvested 32,000 bushels of apples and 10-12,000 bushels of potatoes. During harvest time we took on men from the Pines section of Wilbraham who worked at the Ludlow Mills."

"Dad died in 1940 and Lee and I ran the farm. Dad had bought a Diamond T truck that carried 5 ton – I drove it to Manhattan [New York] at 1: 00 A.M. up to the dock and unloaded it by myself and drove it back home. It was loaded onto a boat for Puerto Rico." Driving from town to the pier and back, Jesse was paid \$1.00 per 100 lb. bag of potatoes. One day he said: "Lee, if you ever grow another potato, I will not help you."

"I worked all my life, except for Sunday. On Sunday Dad slept on the sofa in the living room and he bothered me to no end to take a nap too until I was about 8 years old. Dad never sent us to church – he took us there." The old United Church in town used to be where Gazebo Park is today and the Rice pew was the fifth from the front on the left as you walked down the center aisle. "No one else ever sat in that pew, but us."

“Sometimes my sister, Emma and I walked up to the mountain and played in the brook. I would walk up the lane and pick a maple sapling the size of a pencil and plant it in the backyard here.” Jesse points to 7 full-grown maple trees in the backyard.

Lee graduated from Mass Agriculture (U MASS) in Amherst with a degree in Pomology (fruit cultivation) and married June Brindly from north Wilbraham. He had 2 daughters and a son and he passed away shortly after. There was no one else to help Jesse farm the land that began with 26 fruit trees in 1894. Jesse’s grandfather and father planted peach, plum and apple trees in the area known as the Wilbraham flats.

His grandfather, Jesse Lee Rice was crossing Main Street one day when a passing motorist hit him. The constable, Jerry Donohue, stopped a panel truck and said: “In the name of the law, take Mr. Rice to Wing Hospital.” “ That was the ambulance service in those days” remarked Jesse.

Jesse stopped talking and picked up a small black leather missal from the kitchen table that was his father’s 1894 hand written diary. In perfect pencil penmanship, Jesse’s dad wrote the simple words that would speak to Jesse 114 years later. He wrote of work chores and simple pleasures; and nowadays Jesse rocks in two rocking chairs- he sits in one and extends his legs out onto a second rocking chair and is comforted into the evening by reading his father’s prose.

Jesse’s philosophy is the same as his dad’s: “Do onto others as you would have done unto you.”

By Joan Paris