

WINTER AT THE BIG HOUSE: 1961-1962

BY MOLLY STRANAHAN

Now a New Jersey resident but still a Woody Creeker at heart, George Stranahan's oldest daughter recalls a long-ago winter in this continuation of her memories of a Woody Creek childhood.

In 1961 my family moved into the newly built house on Casady Creek and spent the winter there, our first Woody Creek experience with electricity. My brother, Paddy, and I attended Aspen Elementary School, Paddy in Miss Sardy's first-grade class, I in Mrs. Kuhlman's second-grade one. The new elementary school on Hallam faced the old multistory brick high school across the street, so all the Woody Creek students rode the same bus.

Getting there took about an hour from our house. Actually, the school bus came up the road only as far as the Natals' house, where it could turn around. Molly Marsing, the infamous Jack Flogaus's daughter, would pick us up at the bottom of our driveway and drop us off at the bus turnaround at the Natals' with her two sons and a few kids from Lenado, all of them older than Paddy and I.

Dave Stapleton, an insurance agent in town, drove the school bus. We had assigned seats, and Mr. Stapleton enforced strict rules. We were allowed only to whisper, and only to our seatmates. We couldn't turn around to talk to anyone in front or in back of us. I sat in the second row on the left (the girls' side) with Betty, who was in the fifth or sixth grade, which made her an adult to me. Paddy was lucky enough to be assigned to the last row on the boys' side with the Natals' oldest son, who was a high school senior. As a result, Paddy always had new jokes to share.

Tuesday was "sports afternoon." There was a rack on the side of the bus to carry our skis to school. You could skate instead, if your parents so chose, but we always brought our wooden skis, which had been picked out at the yearly swap meet in the high school gym.

Woody Creek being the site of a number of hunting cabins, hunting season brought many out-of-staters, mostly from Texas and Oklahoma. Early that winter of 1961 the three of us kids who were old enough to walk to the road got new, bright red fuzzy coats with hoods to reduce our likelihood of being mistaken for deer. As extra insurance, Mom had us sing all



The Stranahans in the 1960s

the way as we walked down the driveway and waited by the road for Molly Marsing's Wagoneer.

One memorable Saturday morning, Mr. and Mrs. Sardy brought their sausage-making equipment to our house for the daylong process of making kielbasa. Their adult children came along — Sylvia (Paddy's teacher and first crush, who became "Miss Sylvia" for the day) and TJ, a hero in his Green Beret uniform.

Massive quantities of meat were trimmed and ground into a big washtub while garlic bulbs by the handful were smashed and prepared. Mr. Sardy donned a butcher's apron and plunged his hands into the tub to knead large quantities of ground pepper into the meat. He commanded our attention as he attached his magical sausage machine to the edge of the washtub. As he turned the crank at an even pace, the apparatus sucked up the meat mixture and squeezed it into the casing attached to a nozzle protruding from the machine. Mr. Sardy expertly pinched and twisted the tube at intervals to make sausages ready for the smoker. After learning that the translucent casings were cleaned pig intestines, for years I peeled every sausage I ate.


That Halloween I wanted to be a bunny rabbit. Paddy and Happy agreed, so Mom made costumes for the three of us then old enough to go trick-or-treating. She used a pajama pattern to sew powder-blue pants and white tops with a blue pocket on the shirt to hold a carrot. She painted rabbit ears on heavy paper and attached

them to hair bands, but the ears refused to stay upright. In my opinion, we didn't look much like rabbits.

Woody Creekers didn't expect trick-or-treaters, so we drove to the Caudills' house in Maroon Creek to join forces for a foray into town. Family friends were the chosen victims for our horde of seven children and four adults. The fathers got into the Halloween spirit by dressing as "hobos" and carrying pillowcases, which by evening's end clanked with gifts of various partially filled liquor bottles. We lingered at the Sardys' house despite the mortuary in

the basement, because Dad and Sam had been persuaded to sample a few adult beverages. Later, Mom drove us home — with Happy, Paddy, and me in the front seat of the blue Ford station wagon, as Dad needed the back seat to lie down in.

We were close to home when we came around a bend to see an owl that had to be two feet tall standing in the middle of the road. I can still picture the huge bird's rotating head and its giant eyes staring at us. Mom stopped the car so we could wake up enough to witness the rare sight, while Dad took advantage of the opportunity to open the door and barf.

Uncle Mike, later a long-time resident of a Woody Creek trailer, visited us on his Christmas vacation from college that year. Natalie Gignoux, the owner of Little Percent Taxi, rented Mike a boxy van for him to get to and from our house. One snowy day as he was driving down the valley, at a turn above the Natals' the wheels refused to grip the slick road. The van slid into the hillside, denting the right front of the car, breaking a headlight, and traumatizing Mike. His shaking reappearance was calmed with alcohol, a rest on the couch, and reassurance that Natalie would not cause him bodily harm. Forever after, we called that bend in the Woody Creek Road "Michael's Mash." 

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