

# My Godparents and Uncle Frank

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*By Papa Jack Hoeschler*



In a fit of misplaced hope, my parents asked my Great Uncle Charlie Hoeschler and my Great Aunt Betty Hoeschler to be my godparents. Aunt Betty (*holding me with Mother*) was the second wife of Great Uncle Frank, the patriarch of the Hoeschler family. Apparently, my parents hoped that these choices to oversee my spiritual well-being would result in major gifts to me. My parents seemed to ignore the fact that the childless Uncle Charlie was notoriously tight. Moreover, it was Uncle Frank who was generous, not his wife Betty. By the way, Frank and Charlie were my Grandpa's brothers.

When I celebrated my First Communion at age 7, Uncle Charlie→, a pharmacist at Hoeschler Brothers' Drugstore, gave me a silver dollar. The drugstore clerks were amazed and congratulated me for having gotten so much out of the old skinflint! Uncle Charlie was also a professional mourner, a fact I learned much later. Undertakers paid him to attend funerals of people who had too few friends and relatives to make a good showing of sorrow. Charlie would walk up the street from the drugstore to the Cathedral. There he would pray for the deceased. He was paid about a dollar each time for his efforts.



When Charlie died at age 88, he was the oldest licensed pharmacist in the State of Wisconsin. However, my father never told the State Pharmacy association, in order to keep collecting the fancy gifts the association gave its oldest member. This was my father's way of mourning. I think my father finally notified them of Charlie's death about the time Charlie would have turned 100.



When I was celebrating my 11<sup>th</sup> birthday, ←Aunt Betty brought me an application for a raffle to win a race horse. She had found the “chance to win” in *Parade* magazine. She presented the promotional piece for this million-to-one shot as if she were giving



me the horse itself. I never received much more from her. She, however, was well remembered for almost always spilling her red wine on our white linen tablecloth at Sunday dinner.

Aunt Betty met her match, however, in my brother, Jimmy. Uncle Frank had a fabulous pool table→, but Aunt Betty always kept its slipcover on. Moreover, she used the table to spread out the thousands of snapshots and slides she claimed she was still organizing. When Jimmy visited Uncle Frank’s home, he would often push aside the pictures to use the pool table. Sometimes Aunt Betty could stop Jimmy, but he usually won that battle.



←Great Uncle Frank was a lover of all things German. I remember a conversation we had when I was 10, and he told me how smart the Germans were. He listed the accomplishments of Beethoven, Bach, Goethe, Kant, Schiller, Humboldt, and other great German musicians, writers, philosophers, and scientists.

The Germans had only one failing according to Uncle Frank. They always allowed the no-good British to trick them into wars, like World War I and World War II, which the Germans then proceeded to lose. Even as a 10 year-old I thought this did not sound right.

Family legend has it that Uncle Frank was watched by the FBI during the wars because of his pro-German sympathies.



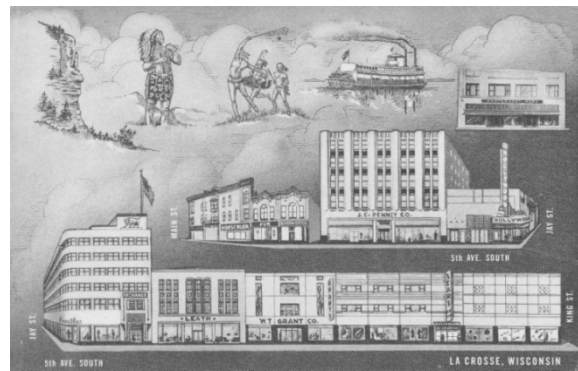
Uncle Frank→ was a dentist by training, and part owner of the Hoeschler Brothers' Drugstore. His dental office was located just above the drugstore. Frank was also a significant developer of downtown La Crosse. His motto



was "Bullish on La Crosse," meaning that he was optimistic about the future of the city. He also collected statuettes of bronze bulls and made bull stamps to stick on envelopes and letters. We may still have some around.



Frank built several handsome Art Deco poured-concrete buildings→ on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue in La Crosse. At Frank's urging, the City changed the name of 5<sup>th</sup> Street to 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, to suggest the more upscale thoroughfare in New York City. Uncle Frank also promoted other visionary land uses for his home town such as making "The Marsh" a lake.



Uncle Frank's great sadness was that he had did not have any children. But he guaranteed his family legacy by his generosity in many ways. For instance, Nonna and I have relied on his genealogy research for writing Hoeschler family history. Uncle Frank also gave all of his nieces and nephews the money to help pay for their college educations. I don't think that I ever thanked him enough for those gifts. *(Uncle Frank and Aunt Betty in New Ulm, 1960. Frank and his three siblings, Julia, Charlie and William were born there.)*

***Now if you promise to be kind and thankful to your fine godparents and aunts and uncles, the next time you can hear why Grandma Hoeschler always sprinkled Papa with Holy Water***

# My Grandparents

*By Papa Jack Hoeschler*

When I was a young boy, all of my grandparents were alive and part of my life. My Hoeschler grandparents lived on North 23<sup>rd</sup> Street in La Crosse, Wisconsin. My Bowe grandparents, my mother's folks, lived on their farm outside Fox Lake, Wisconsin, about 140 miles from La Crosse. Both grandfathers were named William and the grandmothers were named Mabel: spelled M-a-b-e-l for Grandma Bowe, and M-a-e-b-e-l-l-e for Grandma Hoeschler.

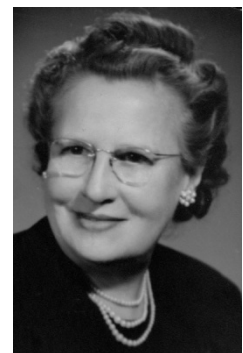


William ("Willie") Bowe was taciturn and sported a farmer tan with a red whisker burn from using a straight edge razor. He did not seem to read much more than the farm commodity prices in the newspaper. Even though Willie was born Catholic,

he never went to church. Indeed, his wife, Mabel McMillan Bowe, a staunch Scotch Presbyterian, was very anti-Catholic. We later learned that she converted to Catholicism at the time of her marriage. But she must have had her toes and fingers crossed because she never had anything good to say about the Catholics. You can read more about my Bowe grandparents in my farm stories.

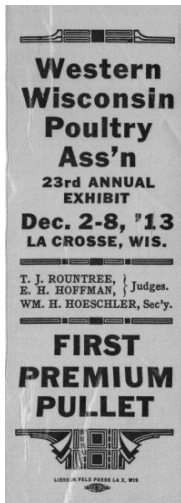


Maebelle Hoeschler → was also a convert from Presbyterianism to Catholicism. But she was more like a typical convert, almost rabid with enthusiasm for her new religion. She would always sprinkle us kids with Holy Water, give us big sloppy kisses, and bless us with the Sign of the Cross when we visited her house. She always



encouraged and helped us to go to church.

This was totally unlike my Bowe grandparents, who were hostile to the mention of church. In fact, it was not until much later in their lives that my two grandmothers had much to do with each other, all because of religion.

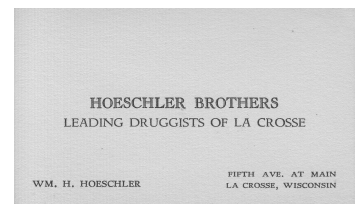


William Hoeschler (“William H.”) was the opposite of Willie Bowe. He was a funny, smart aleck talker at Hoeschler Brothers’ Drugstore. He bred champion chickens in the backyard of his South Fifth Street house, and entered them in poultry competitions at Midwest fairs. William H. had a zigzag career path, not uncommon in those days. He entered, but was asked not to return to the Jesuit seminary in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. Supposedly he complained too much about the lousy seminary food! He then got training in handwriting and would



script invitations and calling cards for his sister and mother. *(Grandpa and I at his house, October 1942)*

William H. received a degree in Pharmacy in Ada, Ohio, followed by graduate work at Marquette University in Milwaukee. He worked happily as a chemist at General Mills in Minneapolis, before he was talked into coming home by his brothers, Frank and Charlie. They wanted him to help run the drug store, and to tend to their mother’s health problems, the seriousness of which they frankly exaggerated.



William H.’s daughter, my Aunt Evelyn Heipp, always said that he would have been happier being a chemist or a veterinarian. He excelled in the drugstore’s veterinary department, and knew all the farmer customers by their first names. But when it came to the drugstore’s regular customers, well, that was another matter. ←William H. often stayed in his mezzanine office at the drugstore until his brother, Charlie, would

call him to come down and help with business. The customers often heard him muttering in disgust at the interruption.



My memories of William H. and Maebelle begin after they had moved from their big old house on South Fifth Street to a new two-story colonial→ on North 23<sup>rd</sup> Street. Their new house was about four blocks from our old home on the same street. William H. grew huge sunflowers in his backyard on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, but did not raise prize chickens at his new home. (*Grandpa, Jay and*



*sunflowers, 1955)*

William H. had dachshunds, most memorably one named Schnappsie. This 1947 photo shows Jimmy and me in a parade with Schnappsie. The dog sports a lovely blue satin ribbon. Grandpa also smoked a pipe and took it everywhere. When my Hoeschler



grandparents went on driving trips, Grandma always did the driving. Grandpa sat in the front passenger seat with his coffee can of pipe tobacco and pipe utensils between his



feet.

My Grandpa Hoeschler died in 1960 from a staph infection following cancer surgery. His cousin, Phil Leinfelder, a priest, said Grandpa was doing well until “he took a turn for the nurse.” Grandma Hoeschler agreed, thinking Father Phil had said “turn for the worse.” We couldn’t decide what was funnier: that Grandma misunderstood the joke, or that the joke came from a priest!

Grandma Hoeschler was generous and talented. She was a great cook, a remarkable seamstress who made beautiful clothes for my sister, and a loving babysitter. She not only rescued me when my mother went off to teach school,

but she also took care of Jimmy and Janice when my parents and I would go off on road trips. I can remember poor Jimmy's face pressed against Grandma's front window as he watched us drive off on another vacation.

As I said before, the religious battle between my two grandmothers only ceased when the two women were older and widows. They not only got along better, they began to take trips to visit each other.



*(Grandmas Bowe and Hoeschler with me, 1964)*

On a trip back from Fox Lake where she had been visiting Grandma Bowe, Grandma Hoeschler was tired when she turned onto 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, just a half block from her home. Somehow, she stepped on the gas rather than the brake, and ran into the rear of an old-style coupe parked on the street. Her car rode up the sloping back of the coupe and careened left across the street, and over the neighbor's lawn. The car finally stopped when it crashed into the corner of the neighbor's house. Luckily, no one was seriously hurt but there was much discussion as to whether or not it was time to take away the keys.

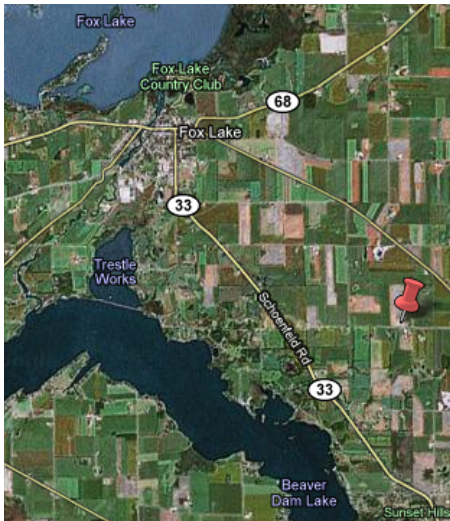
That never happened, however, because my parents were loath to take on the responsibility for driving my grandmother around.

***Now if you promise to continue to be really kind to your grandparents, the next time you can hear how Papa got lost in an animal maze!***

# Willie Bowe Had a Farm...Animal Mazes

*By Papa Jack Hoeschler*

My grandfather, Willie Bowe, had a farm (*red pin*) between Fox Lake and Beaver Dam, Wisconsin, northeast of Madison. I used to spend a month during the summers with him and my grandma, Mabel McMillan Bowe, when I was in grade school. (*My drawing of the Bowe farm when I was 8 years old*↓)



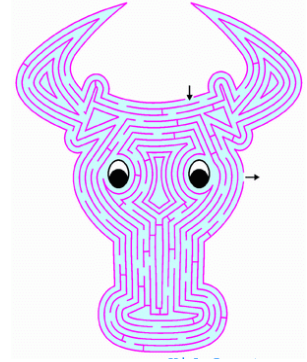
To make some extra money, Willie would transport animals for other farmers to the West Allis stockyard near Milwaukee. A highlight of my Bowe farm summer visits would be riding with Willie (←1947) when he took a load of livestock to the stockyards.

Grandpa and I would drive 2 hours in his GMC truck with a big floor shift to the West Allis stockyard, about 80 miles south east of the farm. Once there, we would unload the pigs or cows into a pen amidst a great maze of pens. We would then walk through the maze to the place where Willie would do his business with the livestock brokers.





When his business was done, Grandpa Bowe would ask me if I could lead the way back through the maze, back to the truck. No matter how hard I tried, I was never able to retrace our path. I would always get lost. Clearly, I had never learned to position myself in relation to large landmarks because I was so intent on opening and closing all of the gates and chutes through which we had to walk.

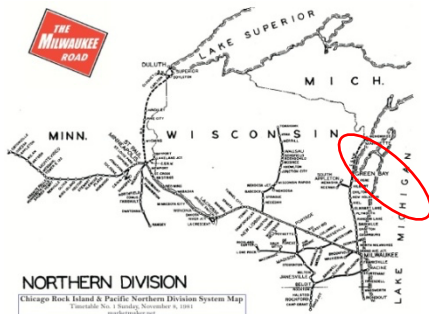


It would be interesting to visit such a stockyard maze as an adult, and see how big and confusing it would be. Unfortunately, these mazes, like all the old stockyards, are long gone, so I'll never know!

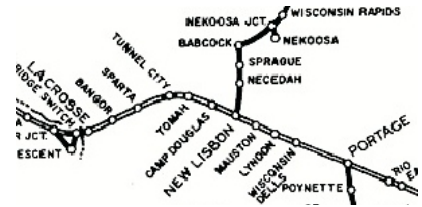
***Now if you promise to always tell some adult before you go into a maze, lest you get lost, too, the next time you can hear how Papa took a milk train by himself when he was only a little kid!***

# Willie Bowe Had a Farm...Getting There

By Papa Jack Hoeschler



An important aspect of my annual visit to my grandparents' farm during the summer was the solo train ride to get there. I traveled from North La Crosse on the Milwaukee Road railroad across the state to Portage, Wisconsin.



Between Sparta and Tomah, we would go through a tunnel at Tunnel City, a highlight of my trip (*←Tunnel City RR model*). We would continue heading southeast to that major state tourist destination, Wisconsin Dells*→*.

Today kids think of the Dells for its many water parks. In my youth, the Dells only offered quieter diversions such as boat rides through the gorges, hiking, picnic grounds, and a zoo.



When we got to Portage (*←Portage switching yard model*) I would have to get off the mainline train. If my grandparents did not pick me up, I would have to find the milk train*→* and ride it for the last 30

miles to Fox Lake Junction. This milk train was a freight train with a single passenger car at the end, about the size of a large caboose. This



spur trip took about two hours to go the 30 miles.



Since I was only about 10, it was not very easy to make this train connection. I am still amazed that my mother would assume that I could do it by myself without mishap or abduction. At least my grandparents were better than my parents about being on time at the ←Fox Lake Junction station to pick me up.

The milk train was deserving of the title since it proceeded very slowly along its rural line, stopping often to pick up cans of milk from various creameries or other collection points. The passengers did not seem particularly friendly or talkative, at least to me. But it did give me a leisurely view of the countryside.



***Now if you promise to always stay near us when we go on our train adventures, the next time you can learn why the pigs on the Bowe farm screamed!***

# Willie Bowe Had a Farm...Description

*By Papa Jack Hoeschler*

The farm owned by my Bowe grandparents was homesteaded and purchased by my grandfather's grandfather, John Bowe, in the 1840's. John Bowe was born in Ireland, came to the United States about 1828, fought in the Seminole Wars in Florida, and took some of his Army pay in Wisconsin land. My grandfather, Willie Bowe, had to take over running the farm in



1905 at age 16.

His father, my great-grandfather, John Bowe Jr., had just died in a tragic farm accident caused by runaway horses. My Bowe grandparents lived in the ←larger, newer house on the property, while my uncle and aunt, Jack and Lou Bowe, lived in the original farmhouse↑ with their two daughters, my

cousins, Sandy and Sally.

The 160-acre farm was a broadly mixed operation with 15 to 20 dairy cows, many pigs and chickens, plus two old work horses, *Trixie* and *Tony*→ who were kept on as pets. My grandparents grew field and sweet corn, oats, barley, alfalfa, and peas. The sweet corn and peas were sold to the Green Giant



William Bowe points out to his grandson, Jackie Hoeschler; his son, Jack; Jack's wife and baby daughter, Sandy, some of the progress made on the beautiful Wisconsin homestead near Beaver Dam, since John Bowe got the original land grant signed by President Zachary Taylor.

cannery in Fox Lake, similar in size and appearance to the Pomeroy cannery pictured. Many Fox Lake farmers depended on the Jolly Green Giant for

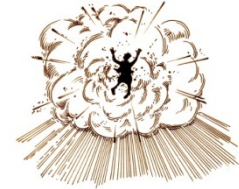


primary cash income. It was a good deal for all the area farmers.

The field corn was chopped and blown into a silo to provide winter feed for



the cows. The ←silo amounted to a big pickle jar where the corn was allowed to partially ferment in its own juices. You had to be careful when you climbed to the top of the silo and pitched the packed and fermented corn down the chute to the cows. You could be overcome and killed by the methane gas that was released by the fermenting corn. Good air circulation at the top of the silage stack was critical to our safety.



Each cow had her own ←stanchion↓ in the barn and each knew where to go without any prompting or prodding. If a cow ever got into the wrong place, it caused a commotion. I would help put down straw for the cows' beds,

and distribute silage and feed grain at the head of the stanchions. I would also push manure out of the troughs at the back of the stanchions. I was sometimes allowed to milk the cows, either by hand while balanced on a single legged stool, or more often, by using a milking machine.

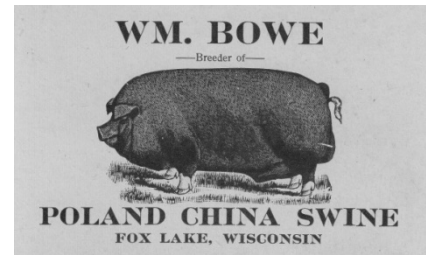


There was usually a radio playing in the barn and a bunch of cats to keep the mice and rats at bay. It was quite warm and cozy in the barn, even in winter, from all the heat of the animals.

My grandparents' farm was only relatively neat and no match for the very well painted and maintained Madigan farm across the road. Ours always seemed to need paint, and the outbuildings were dilapidated. I have a memory, which my mother denied, of the Bowes piling manure around the basement walls of the farmhouse in the fall. The manure provided extra insulation in the winter, and

gave off heat as it decayed. The Bowes were much more Shanty than Lace-Curtain Irish.

My grandfather was well known for the Poland China pigs he bred and raised. Sometimes I would be there when they would castrate the small male piglets in order to make them grow fatter and to be less aggressive. You never heard such pitiful screams!



The Bowes raised chickens for the eggs they laid (*my mother, her dad and brother with hens*). One time when my cousins Bill and Bob Skinner → were also on the farm with me and Jimmy, we were all bad boys. As in *really* bad!



First, we put a bunch of eggs through a hand cranked corn ←grinder. Then we threw eggs at the barn wall. As if that weren't enough mischief, we then chopped off the heads of some baby ducks. Needless to say, we all got good spankings. Perhaps that was why for the rest of her life, Grandma Bowe would always mutter under her breath, "Shiftless kids, shiftless kids."



Grandma Bowe also made her own soap out of ←lard from the pigs (lard is rendered fat) and lye. Her product was hard and strong, and really dried out our skin, too.



***Now if you promise not to throw any eggs, except when doing an egg toss, the next time you can hear how Papa drove a tractor when he was just a kid!***

# Willie Bowe Had a Farm...Threshing

*By Papa Jack Hoeschler*

A major highlight of my annual stay at my grandparents' farm was threshing. Most farmers by the early 1950's had traded in their old threshing machines → for a



←combine that could cut, separate and shell the wheat as the huge machine went through the field. But the Bowes still used an old-style threshing machine, and always worked with their neighbors to



do the harvesting on a collective basis. Each farm supplied the manpower, and the machine went from farm to farm to separate the wheat from the straw.

Actually, the process had about four separate steps. First, the grain had to be



cut and bundled by a ←reaper that was drawn by a tractor. The reaper had a sickle bar that cut the standing grain, laid it onto a moving belt which collected the stalks in bundles, tied a twine knot around the bundle, and dumped it out onto the ground.

While the invention of the reaper by McCormick was very important in the progress toward an efficient, mechanized farm, I later learned that the really clever invention was the one that cut and knotted twine around the bundle.

Next, the men had to walk through the field and place the individual bundles of grain into a special pile called a



←shock, in order to allow the grain to dry. About 7 to 10 days later, the bundles in the shocks would be tossed into a wagon. The wagon was



pulled by a tractor and driven slowly through the field by me, a meaningful responsibility for a 10 or 12 year old!

*↑I'm surely not yet 10!*



The wagon would then be taken to the threshing machine. The machine was positioned near the barn so that the straw could be blown onto a straw pile to be used for food and bedding for the cows. (*My mother leads a straw pile march.*)



The threshing machine → was powered by a big tractor (first fired by steam, later gas) that was connected to the threshing machine by a long belt. The belt had to be twisted once so that the wheels would operate in the right direction. Sometimes you see threshing paintings where the city-raised painter has failed to twist the long belt the way any farmer would know was necessary.



The wagon holding the grain bundles would be parked near the front of the threshing machine. Men would ←pitch the bundles into the threshing machine, where the wheat would be separated from the straw. The separated wheat was loaded into a separate wagon or truck. It was loud, hot, dusty work, but very exciting because of all the people involved and the large communal lunches.

The technology was still simple enough that a young kid could play a productive part. Today the machinery is much more complicated, expensive and dangerous, so that kids can't do what I once enjoyed and learned so much from. Sometimes progress isn't necessarily progress.



***Now if you are always careful around mechanical equipment, the next time you can learn how Nonna made sure that the top train bunk never fell down!***