

Historic Childs: Reflections, Part 2

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Mary Ann (Janus) Spychalski recalls 5-cent ice cream, button collection, doll hospital and her family's service station



By Doug Farley, Cobblestone Museum Director

Author's note: It was a great pleasure to meet and share Mary Ann (Janus) Spychalski's life reflections. At 90 years young, she is remarkable force to be reckoned with. I greatly enjoyed our short time together.

Mary Ann (Janus) Spychalski, (right) at age 3 with her cousin John Stucko, has many stories to tell about growing up in the Hamlet of Childs. Her father and mother, Joe and Lucy Janus, bought the filling station on the north side of Ridge Road (next to the Cobblestone Schoolhouse) in 1926. The gas station pumps are also shown in this image looking north from Ridge Road.

Mary Ann, now 90 years old, said, "I was born in the house at the filling station in 1930. I went to school next door at the cobblestone school through the seventh grade, then finished up in Albion."



Mary Ann shared that living next door to the school opened up some interesting opportunities for her family. She said, "It's true that it takes a village to raise kids." Her mother, Lucy, was known to keep watch over the children as they arrived for school. If any of them had happened to get dirty on their walk to school, which seemed to be a frequent occurrence, especially for the boys, Lucy would dust them off and take a washcloth to their face and hands. Lucy said she didn't want the teacher to have to look at dirty faces all day. Mary Ann described her mother as a hard worker. She was one of 9 children in her family and she went to work at age 14 and never stopped working.



Mary Ann was 8 years old in 1938 when this class picture was taken at the District #5 Schoolhouse in Childs. Her teacher shown at top left was Mae Hollenbeck. Mary Ann (front row, second from right) said, "The girls wore dresses to school every day."

The students shown are: (Front row) Jack Murray, Janice Murray, Phyllis Brown, Geraldine Hewitt, Lillian Wildschultz, George Ingraham, Russell Williams, Rosalie Canham, Frances Burgio, Mary Ann Janus and Tony Burgio. (Row 2) John & George Donovan (twins), Janice Barnum, Betty Janus, Elizabeth Nickerson, Beverly Murray, Peggy Donovan and Joyce

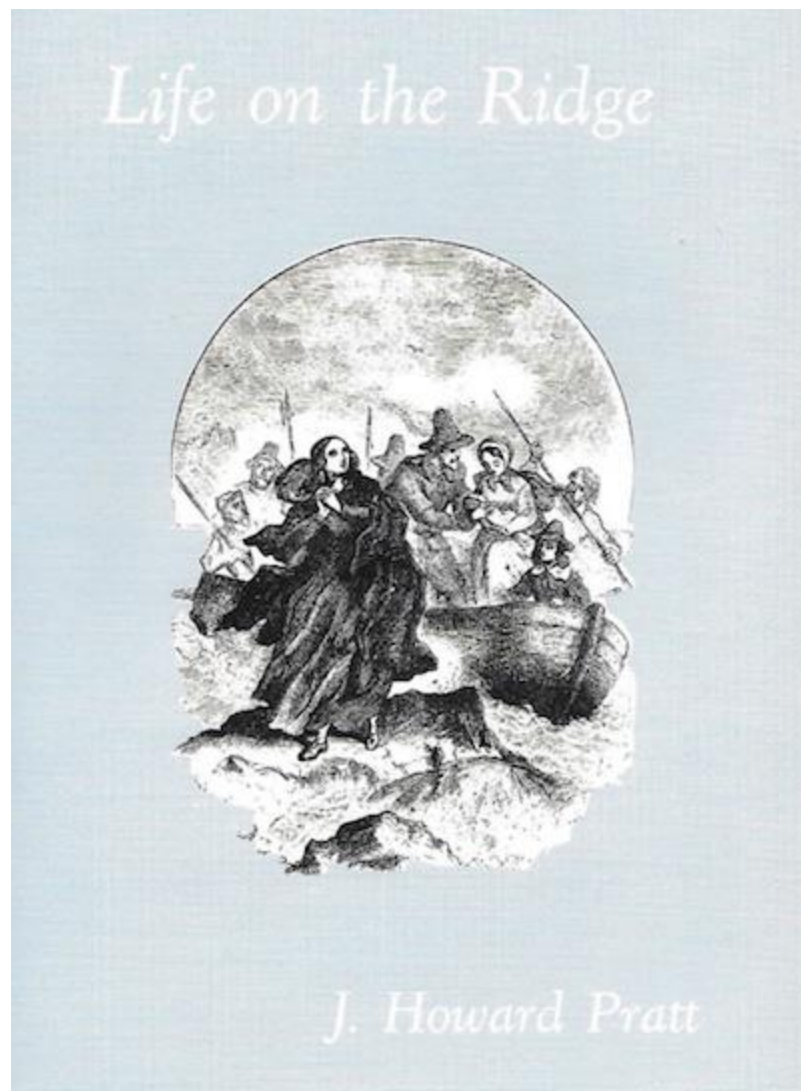
Ellis. (Top row) Mae (Canham) Hollenbeck, Bob Moore, George Murray, Iva Pask, Martha Henshenmacher, Edith Knickerbocker, Marian Williams, Virginia Kelly and Doreen Brown.



Mary Ann has become an ardent button collector and has even made a shadow box using her class picture and a swatch of the dress that she wore for the photograph. She remains a button collector today.



Mary Ann's brother, Ed, is shown here with a snowman he made in the school's side yard. Mary Ann has many great memories of life at the District #5 School including how her teacher, Julia McAllister, would make baked potatoes in the school's wood furnace in the basement. During the WWII years, Mary Ann remembers Miss McAllister making hot cocoa using war surplus cocoa provided by the federal government. Also in the winter, Mr. Barnum would bring his sleigh to the school and take all the kids for a sleigh ride.



Another highlight of Mary Ann's one room schoolhouse education were visits by Howard Pratt. Mr. Pratt came to the school to teach children about their local history. He went on to write several books about life on the Ridge Road which are still widely enjoyed today.



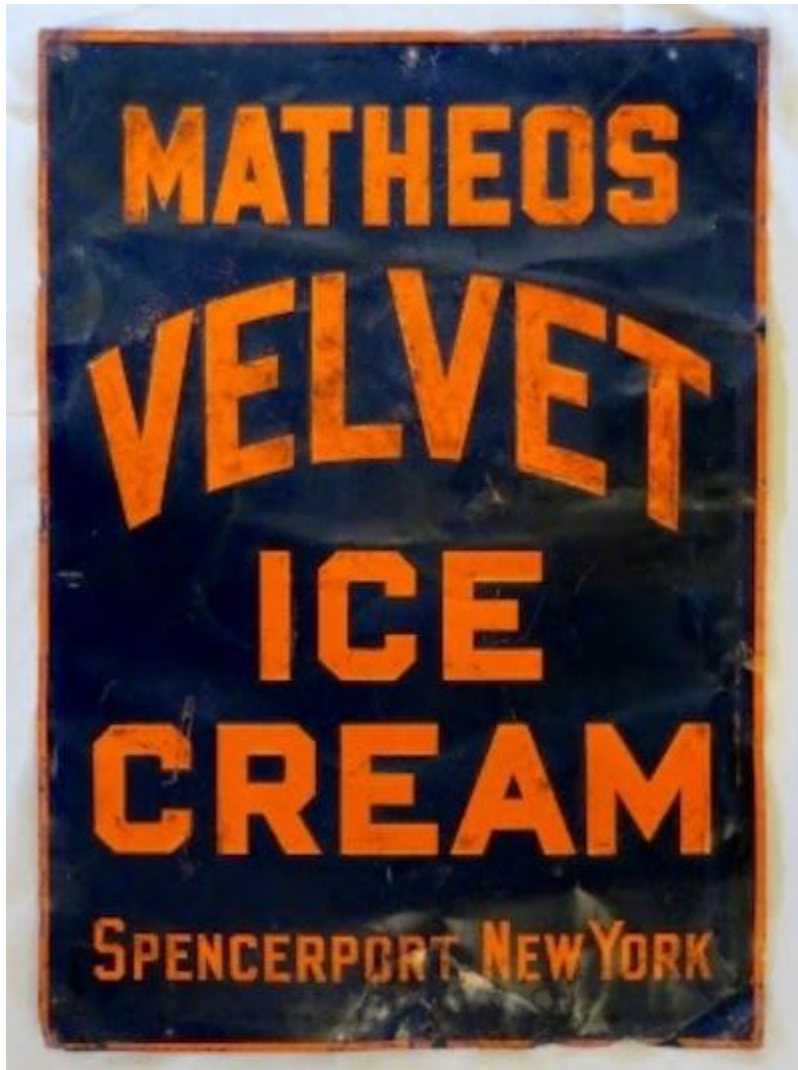
Mary Ann also enjoyed playing on the swings at the school playground at recess. Her father, Joe Janus, was a school trustee for several years in the 1930s. Mary Ann said that even though she lived right next door and could walk home for lunch, she would rather bring a bag lunch so she could eat with the other students and spend more time on the playground.



Advancing into her teen years, Mary Ann, seen here at age 15, said the kids would hang out at Balcom's Store at the intersection in Childs. The store sold food and farm supplies to local residents. Kids would walk to Balcom's to get the school bus to Albion High School. Mary Ann still remembers the name of her bus driver, Kirke Bell. While at Balcom's the kids would catch up on the latest neighborhood news away from earshot of their parents.



Mary Ann said, "Life at my family's Service Station was always exciting." Her mother pioneered roadside cuisine in a day-and-age before fast food. "My mother served up 'minute steaks' and hot dogs to hungry motorists. She made her own homemade pickle relish." The service station had the first freezer in the community so Lucy could freeze meat and ice cream to serve at the lunch counter. Mary Ann's sister Betty and neighbor, Levi Woodcook, are seen here at the roadside window in the 1940s.



Photograph courtesy Spencerport Depot & Canal Museum

Mary Ann recalls how much she enjoyed the ice cream cones, two dips for 5 cents. The Service Station bought their ice cream from Matheos Brothers in Spencerport. "Velvet Ice Cream" was delivered in three gallon metal containers. Mary Ann fondly remembered an ice cream treat called "OO-La-La's," which was a chocolate covered confection on a stick. She said, "If lucky, the stick would say 'FREE,' meaning your next treat was on-the-house."



To better serve local farmers, Mary Ann recalled that her father, Joe, built a jitney of sorts, an old car chassis with four wheels and a welding machine attached to the top. Joe drove that contraption right into the farmers' fields and used it to weld and repair their farm equipment, on the spot. Joe and his brother, Phil, are seen here in 1932 working at the Service Station's open grease pit that was used to service tractors and cars. A ladder extended down into the pit so Joe could service the vehicles, standing up, underneath. Remnants of the pit still exist today next to the schoolhouse. Mary Ann said, "Mom and Dad warned us kids to stay away from the pit. We didn't listen very well, but the worst thing that happened was we got pretty dirty playing down there."



Mary Ann said her father died in 1945, and his brother Frank Janus and Frank's wife Vicky took over the operation of the Service Station, as seen here in 1946. She said, "Frank and Vickie had lived in the city in Buffalo, and it was a big shock moving out to the country. It took a while for the pair to get used to country life and also for the 'locals' to get adjusted to them." She reflected, "In the end, it worked out well, and they extended the life of the service station another couple decades."



McCormack-Deering Wooden Thresher – 1923

Mary Ann recalls the excitement each year surrounding the arrival of Charley Plummer's threshing machine when it was time for wheat harvesting. All the neighborhood kids would gather around and watch the machine at work. She said, "The kids were told to stay out of the way of the threshing machine. Good advice, but sometimes not well heeded."



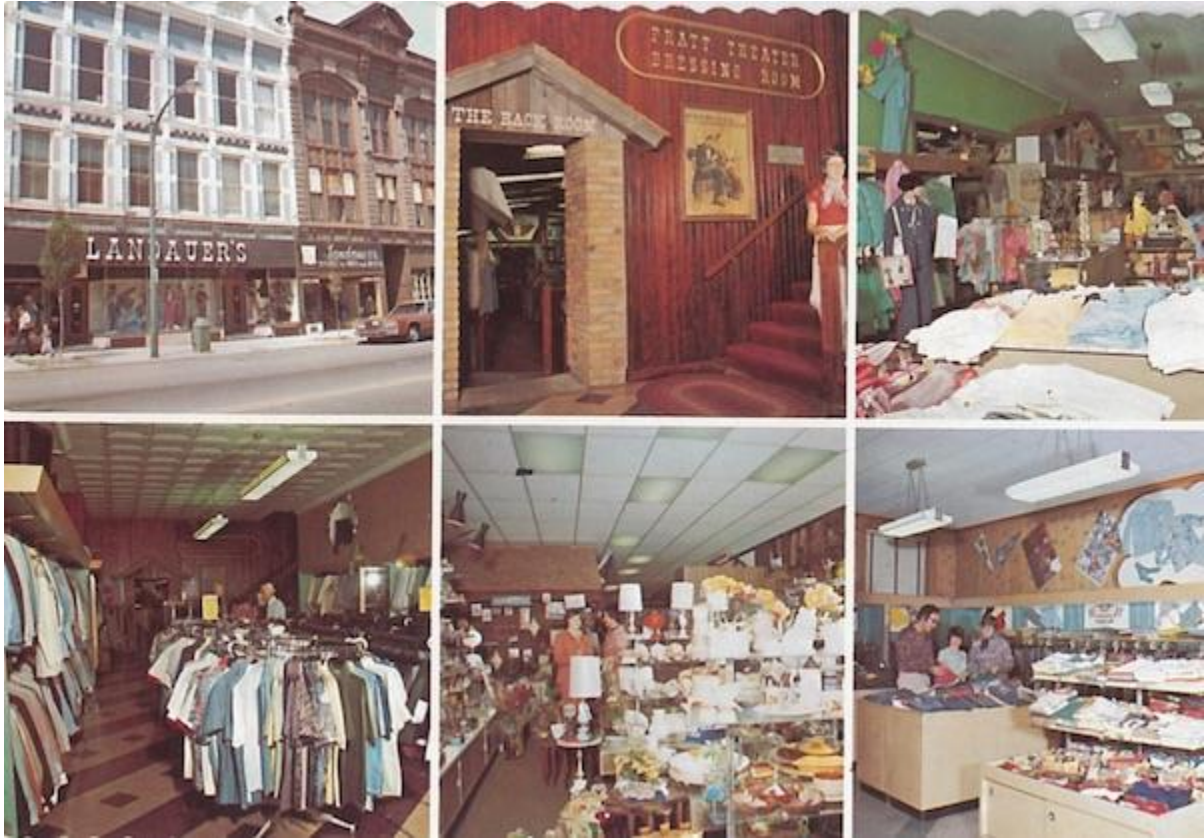
Another highlight for Mary Ann was the Doll Hospital at the Murray Farm in Childs. Mary Miller Murray, shown here, took in “injured” dolls and would repair their broken limbs and smudged faces. The Doll Hospital was a local landmark that had a following that stretched across the country.



Mrs. Murray and her children, George, Joyce and Janice, known as the “Marionette Merry-makers,” created a “Disneyesque” experience for local children complete with marionettes and stage and much more. The Murrays would put on puppet shows, a wonderful diversion in a day and age preceding television.



Mary Ann said, “Mrs. Murray even made me a doll using my own hair for a wig. I had braided hair then, and she used one of the braids to give my doll, ‘Shirley Temple,’ that look-like-me appearance. Coming off the Depression, this was great fun!” Mary Ann and her doll, are shown in the center of this dress-up-day photo. Her cousin, Herman, and sister, Betty, joined in the fun.



In 1949, after her school days, Mary Ann went to work at Landauer's at age 19. She sold fabric, notions and buttons. (Perhaps this is how she developed her life-long fascination with buttons.) The store, opened in 1865, was located on the west side of Main Street in Albion at the site of the current Browsery. Mary Ann left her employment after a few years to marry and raise her family, but returned for Landauer's last two years of operation before closing.