

Stories remembered by Robert Porter Lynch *from my family that lived in Warren, RI*

My mother, Viola Bak Lynch, was born on August 20, 1922 in a Triple Decker house at 68 Union Street in Warren. The idea of a triple decker was for a poor immigrant family to buy a house, live in the top floor (which was the least desirable to rent), and lease out the 1st and 2nd floors. The income from the rents was enough to pay the mortgage. Other costs would be borne by the owner, who had other income from the family working in the local mills.

Mom's mother, Pelagia Bak, was living in a bungalow at 5 Legion Way in the Auburn section of Cranston (behind City Hall and behind the fire station). When it was time for my mom (Viola) to be born in August 1922, Pelagia went to her mother's (Katarzyna Stachowiak) home to give birth.

As a teenager, Viola would ride her bicycle from Cranston to Warren (15 miles each way) on the weekends to visit her Grandmother.



Katarzyna Olszewski Stachowiak (1879-1945) (the next generation changed their name to Stack)

Roofing the Union Street Triple Decker

Her Grandfather, Josef Stachowiak, was hard working. He was an entrepreneur, setting up his butcher shop on Water Street, that had three employees.

Josef was always fixing things around the house. As he grew older, he did not want to relinquish any of his time-honored responsibilities. During the Great Depression of the 1930's the roof began leaking quite badly. With money extremely scarce in that era, he vowed to do the repairs himself.



However, the roof was very steep, and he was small and was getting frail. So he clamored cautiously up a three story ladder, and climbed up onto the roof with a rope tied around his waist.

On the other side of the house his wife Katarzyna (Katherine) had the other end of the rope tied around her waist, so, if he slipped, she would prevent a fall. He put a new roof on the house in close liaison with his wife. Great teamwork.

Boot Legging in Warren

Josef operated a butcher shop on west side of Water Street between Sisson and Company Streets. During the early 1930's, my mother recalled visiting the store and there was always a busy flow of people in and out. She remembered the old pickle barrels, the wooden counters, the wooden crates of soda, and the jars of candy.

Every once and a while the local policeman would drop by; he would go into the back room with her Grandfather, and emerge with a big smile. For years my father speculated that Joe Stachowiak was making bathtub gin, something my mother would vehemently deny, vigilantly upholding her grandfather's reputation.

About 1986, I while I was restoring the Nathaniel Porter Inn, I was walking down Water Street. Old man Ginalski, who lived near the corner of Water and Johnson Streets was sitting on his front steps. We struck up a conversation, and when he learned that Joseph Stachowiak was my Great Grandfather, he piped up:

"Yeah, I knew your great grandfather. He had the store just down the street. Let me tell you a story I remember like it was yesterday. One day my mother sent me to his store to buy some things and a couple of bottles of Coca Cola.

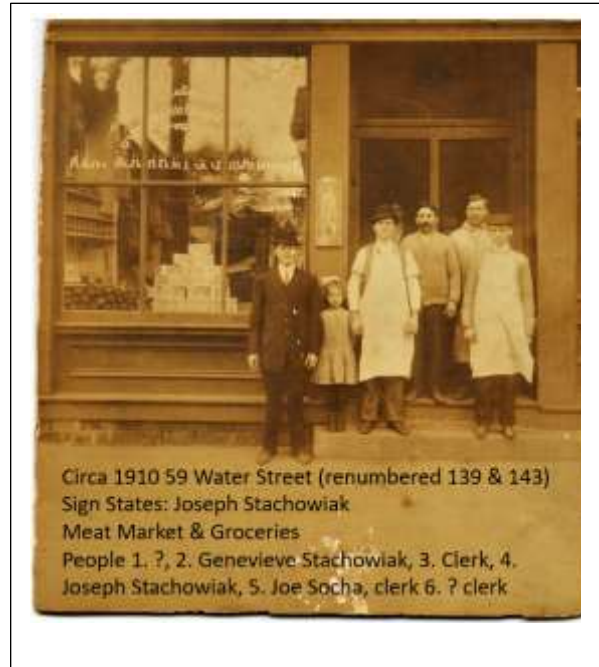
When I went to the wooden rack where the Coke was and pulled out two bottles, old man Stachowiak came running over and hit me hard on the knuckles with a stick. I yelled and went running home and balled to my mother. She was furious and came storming into the store to confront him for hitting me for no reason at all – she thought I was totally innocent.

After she chewed him out for a few minutes, your Great Grandfather went over to the Coke rack, and politely pulled out two bottles of "Coke" and asked 'Since when is Coke clear?' Your Great Grandfather was selling booze, just like everyone else on this street. That's why we've had so many bars on Water Street. They never went out of business during Prohibition."

My Grandmother, Peggy (Pelagia) recalled that during Prohibition there was a constant stream of people coming into Warren from the Fall River train. She observed that they carried suitcases as they disembarked, but oddly there were only a very few hotel rooms in town. She also said, quite quizzically, that their suitcases were always seemingly empty and light when they entered town, and burdensomely heavy when they got back on the train.

When I told the story to my Aunt Gene, Peggy's sister, Gene exclaimed: "Oh, they were all coming into town to buy liquor here. Everyone sold booze on Water Street. You see, they had Prohibition in Massachusetts, but we didn't have it here in Rhode Island!" Peggy was always a bit naïve or overly protective of her father's reputation.

My father's speculation was right.



Rum Running in Warren

In 1975 I was with Eddy “Rip” Higgins in the living room of his home on Main Street. I was head of the 1976 Revitalization Commission, and brought up the problems of the bars on Water Street. Rip told me the story of how Warren was a rum-running central drop-off point, especially because of the amount of waterfront. Rip was the chief of staff for Theodore Francis Green for Green’s entire political career. When Green was governor in 1933 and Prohibition was still in effect, he recounted:

“One night I got a phone call in the state house. The G-men had a tip there was going to be a landing of booze on the Kickemuit River. So I drove back to Warren to get a front row seat on the raid.

“When the rum runner came up the river and began landing the boxes of bonded scotch on the shore, the G-men closed in and arrested everyone.

“They then took the scotch on a truck to the Warren Police Station to put the booze under lock and key in the Jail.

“I watched as the loading party would put the first box in the jail cell, but the guys with the second box went past the jail door, around the back, and put the booze on another truck. Every other box bypassed the jail. We all chuckled.”

During the Cold War

My Polish great grandparents had both passed away by the time I was born in 1947. The Triple Decker became the home of great Uncle and Aunt Bernard and Meta (Atkinson) Stack. After the Second World War, there were massive refugee problems, and a great famine in 1946-47. Americans rallied to help their European relatives by sending C.A.R.E. packages.



I remember as a very little boy, perhaps 5 years old, being shuttled by my mom from our home in Cranston, with my grandmother Pelagia. We’d drive to Warren with a car full of food and clothes. We’d climb up to the 3rd floor, where a number of Polish families from Warren would gather to fill C.A.R.E. packages bound for our Polish relatives. These folks would tell stories of the letters they were receiving from Poland about the scarcity of food and basics because the Russians were stripping the country under Stalin’s iron fist.

We’d put sugar, flower, and cans in the food boxes.

Clothes worn by my older cousin Bernard Stack, were handed down to me as he outgrew them. Then my outgrown clothes, along with donations from our neighbors would go into the child’s clothes boxes. Adult clothes went into other boxes. We even donated toothpaste, toothbrushes, soap, and towels. Then these were shipped off to Poland. My mom, a devout Roman Catholic, said it was all about Love Thy Neighbor, and that we must never forget our family.