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Eccentricity Made Life and Work “Bearable” During Depression

Excerpt from memoirs by Pat Mighell Paxton

Aurora attorney Lee Mighell (1870-1948) had Stone House built in 1911 and lived there until his death. His sister Ida Mighell (1868-1955) bequeathed \$1 million for a home for retired teachers. The resulting Mighell Fund eventually made it possible for the Plum Landing Retirement Community to be built next to the Stone House on Lake Street in Aurora.



Pictured right are the Albert Mighell children. First Row: Lee, Olive, Jessie. Back Row: Ida and Wynn.

The Great Depression was still very much in evidence here in the Fox Valley during the late 1930s. My dad (former Auroran Stanley “Buck” Mighell) was farming his cousin’s (Lee Mighell) asparagus farm on Baseline Road, as well as working as a welder at Lyon Metal whenever there was work available. Cash was in short supply for farmers, so Stan welcomed the chance to earn extra money working for Lee at his home on North Lake Street.

Lee, an Aurora attorney, was a wee bit eccentric in that he kept a bear as a pet and enjoyed driving it around town in the trunk of his car. He’d had a hole cut in the trunk lid the size of the bear’s head, so the bear could ride with his head outside the car, much as a dog rides with its head out a window.

John Harding was employed as gardener and handyman by Lee. John would often work with Stan on projects that required a helper, such as the building of a den for the bear to use during hibernation.

The dam on the Fox River’s west branch went out during the summer of 1937 or 1938, causing the level of the river to drop three and a half feet upstream from the New York Street Bridge. Since Lee had talked for some time of building a boat house, he decided this was the opportune time.

So, while the dam was out, Stan and John set to work quarrying stone from a ledge that jutted out into the river. This enabled the two men (and three other men John had brought in) to break off great pieces of stone to be used to build the boat house on the remaining rock. The stone they were quarrying was about two feet below the water's surface.

Now comes a strange twist to the story. About the time the stone was all neatly stacked on the riverbank, a muscular man in his thirties came walking along the railroad tracks that ran between the house and the river. He stopped to ask if Lee was interested in giving him a job.

It turned out that the man was a stone mason from New England who was traveling the country (as so many other people were during the 1930s) and he needed the work. The mason gave only his first name and insisted on being paid in cash.

During the days he and Stan worked side by side, he offered no more information than what he had given to Lee the first day. He did excellent work and was easy to work with. Stan learned lots of tricks of the trade from him. John Harding and the other three men kept Stan and the mason supplied with stone as the walls went up.

During the weeks it took to build the structure, Stan and the others noted that the mason always had his belongings with him in the satchel he had been carrying that first day. They surmised that he was sleeping at night along the riverbank, which was overgrown with trees, shrubs and weeds. When the job was completed, the mason left without revealing any more about himself.

As a child, I remember the boat house as a dark, damp place with rowboats suspended from the ceiling and the constant splashing of water inside. Occasionally, we would take one of the boats out for a ride up the river or we would fish from the roof of the boat house, which is now known as Plum Landing.

A footnote about the bear: The bear became too much to handle and impossibly cross upon wakening from hibernation in the spring. So, Lee donated it to the Phillips Park Zoo, where it became the first of several bears to reside there.



Plum Landing

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