

# MY HAMMOND PIECE

By Bill Lewis

Caveat: What follows is not the model; it is not how you should write your story. What you add to these pages should be uniquely you in order for this experiment to work. Remember, we all have Hammond in common, but what it looked/looks like to you, how you experienced it, and your memories are yours and yours alone. I am really excited to see your additions!

My Hammond circa 1953-1959

For a visual example of my Hammond, please take a long look at the cover photo on the Hammond Memories page. That was my downtown, the place where I spent a portion of nearly every day and many nights through the school year. I ate in the restaurants, got groceries for mom, got my hair cut, learned to shoot pool, learned to bowl and set pins at Bernie's, got stuff at the hardware for dad, and so on. One thing on the Home Restaurant...when they started selling frozen custard, I thought Hammond had arrived. However, as an equal opportunity consumer of those days, the Icicle had the best hamburgers...just sayin'.

Through the years, and the Lord has blessed me with many, I have been asked innumerable times where I grew up, or where I was from. My response invariably was the same: I was raised in a farming community in the tiny town of Hammond, on the banks of the St Lawrence River, in Northern New York.

That was most often received in a polite but rather dumbfounded way. The follow-up question, if in fact there was one, was often: "Were you a farmer?" or "What do you mean, farming community?" To the former the answer though technically "no", was never quite that easy to supply. To the latter, my response was most often a description of what Hammond meant to me in the mid to late fifties. I am certain that my last response to either of those questions was more embellished; more considered; and definitely wordier than the first. Perhaps the difference between DVD definition, with 5.1 surround sound and 3D IMAX would be a better way to state the contrast.

A farming community was a wonderful place to grow up, and Hammond, in the fifties, had to be one of the best. It was a place where many small family farms

comprised the vast majority of real estate in the township. It was a place where small businesses that supplied the goods and services for the community were tied to the farmers in a mutually dependent system of trust. In a dairy farming community like Hammond, the economic pulse was in large part dictated by the fate of the milk check. So for business people and farmers alike, there were lean times and flush times.

One of the main pillars of community, in any of its definitions or applications is the thread of common interest. Thomas Jefferson wanted the United States to remain a nation of small family farmers because of that common interest. He believed that we would be strong because our success would be tied to cooperation among people with common goals. Of course he lost that discussion and the future to Alexander Hamilton's vision of the U.S. as an industrial nation, in the mold of Western Europe, where competition was the common bond. Today, Hammond stands as an example of how Hamilton's vision, left unchecked can destroy community.

The Hammond of my story was a thriving community. Post war optimism created a wonderful environment in which to grow both businesses and families. There were three grocery stores, two restaurants (with juke boxes), two mechanics shops, a barbershop, billiard parlor, bowling alley, hardware store, plumbing supply, two fuel businesses, drug store, post office, bank, farm co-op (GLF), library, town hall/theater, doctor, meat locker (before everyone had freezers) and a new, modern brick school. It is a certainty that I have left something off this list, but the point made is that Hammond was a bustling little place.

It was the heyday of fraternal and social organizations. There were the Odd Fellows and Rebekahs, the Masons and Eastern Stars, and the Grange. The Odd Fellows, Masons and the Grange each had their own hall. There was always a garden club and bridge clubs and quilters and others I can't remember. My dad was a Mason and my mom an Eastern Star, and I could have cared less in those days.

I have often told people that I saw, heard, smelled and tasted farm for twelve months a year and yet I was not from a farming family. I would usually wait for them to ask: "What do you mean tasted?" with a disgusted look on their face. Then came the part when I would smile and say: "I was raised on raw milk from when I was born. The milk came from the Demick farm two doors down from my house.

When I walked out my front door, the first thing I saw, often heard and sometimes smelled was the farm across the street. That was the McQueer farm. That was

when the big barn was still there. When I walked out the back door I saw the Demick farm. It was always hard for people unfamiliar with rural living to picture farms located in the village limits and farm houses part of the village mix.

Hammond had several. Our house was two doors down from the Presbyterian Church. The neighbor between us and the church was Lela Mills. She was a retired school teacher, a great flower gardener and a wonderful woman. She was what was referred to as a maiden lady back in the day. On the other side, between us and the Demicks were the Burnhams. They were also great neighbors, and had the best vegetable garden I ever saw. Connecticut was their home but this was their summer place. Tom and Betty Chapman live there now.

My dad was in the fuel business. He bought a coal business and my uncle joined him when he returned from military service. They named the business Lewis & Lewis. Later they expanded the business into kerosene, fuel oil, and gasoline, and eventually propane. Two things always fascinated me about that business; the four huge coal silos and the drive on scales. The silos seemed the tallest and biggest structures in town when I was little. They were used to store the different types of coal that were delivered by train right near the silos. The coal was then put in the silos with an elevator. Dirty, dusty work. The scales' primary function was to weigh the coal truck to determine the weight of the coal they would deliver at so much per ton, but they used to weigh all kinds of vehicles and even teams of horses that competed in horse drawing contests at field days and fair days.

Hammond was in many ways a closed community. Strange cars were noted immediately and strange people even more so. That condition led to a feeling of safety and togetherness that I would never find again, after I left Hammond.

We were members of the First Presbyterian Church. The church was Presbyterian in the Scots Presbyterian tradition. Pastors with names like Ferguson and Campbell led congregations that included members of various kilted family trees.

I attended Sunday school there; had my confirmation there, was part of Youth Group there, and learned what Jesus looked like there. At the end of the hall in the class room section on the first floor was a picture of Jesus. That image was burned into my brain, beginning with my first Sunday school class till today. The only thing I didn't do there but wanted to, was sing in the choir with that awesome organ.

Some of my best memories of church I have shared on this site before, but I will repeat them here because they are at the heart of my story on church. The

sanctuary in that church really was a sanctuary. The round domed ceiling with the chandeliers, the stained glass windows and that magnificent organ taking up most of the area behind the choir loft, and all the hard wood of the pulpit and alter, made for a wonderful Sunday morning experience. When I walked in there, the rest of the world disappeared behind me. On sunny mornings the East-facing windows would light up with glorious colors and paint the pews and floor. And, when the choir started singing (it seemed there were always wonderful singers) with that magical organ, filling the space with heavenly sounds, all was well with the world, because God was in the house

Some of the most fun church times were the pot luck suppers. I really looked forward to those. I learned early who the best cooks and bakers were and homed in on their stuff. The meals were awesome, and the atmosphere fun and loud. As soon as the meal was done and the tables were cleared, one of the women of the church who could play piano, would start playing oldies of the day. They were the songs of my parents' and grandparents' generations. They would pass out song sheets for those of us, who didn't know the words, and everybody sang; I mean everybody, and we rocked that old church basement.

My grandfather Lewis was Welsh. He was the doctor in the community for more than 50 years, and many of my contemporaries and those a generation before, were delivered by him. Nearly every family in the community received his care at one time or another. My grandmother Lewis was a Scot, and her maiden name was Elliott; Belle Elliott. Both she and my grandfather emigrated here from Canada. They had two sons. Edmund Elliott, and my dad, Thomas Alexander, but most people called him TA. My mother's parents were also Canadian emigres; French Canadian more specifically. Their family name was Madlin, and they moved here and raised a family of six girls and two boys in Morristown. Good Catholic family. Mom's name was Margret Ruth. I am the youngest of three sons: Thomas George (TG), Preston Elliott (Pret) and me, William Ernest (Bill).

So in my Hammond of the mid to late fifties, like in the country generally, things were about as traditional and in the box as you could imagine. Most every boy I knew had a buzz cut or flat top. At one time or another I wore both, they were Bernie's specialties and the accepted national look for upstanding boys and young men. Bernie was the war hero, barber, funny guy and all around cool dude who drove very cool cars. But I was fighting both my parents and Bernie to go long. I

wanted to look like Elvis. I wanted a D.A.! It stood for duck's ass. You can google that.

This was when rock and roll was birthing a radical change in music and culture that would powerfully influence my generation and those that followed. We listened to Buddy Holly (Peggy Sue), Richie Valens (La Bamba), J.P. 'The Big Bopper' Richardson and Elvis while riding around smoking cigarettes in old cars with radios that had one 6x9 inch speaker in the dash. For slow dancing and cuddling (there's that word again) we listened to the doo-wop groups. You can google that too. But we were cool. Some of us agonized over the plane crash that killed Holly, Valens and Richardson. That day would later be known as "The Day the Music Died".

Dances at school were sock hops with records, 45s mostly (the little ones with the big hole in the center) and only rarely live music. We learned to jitterbug and square dance and slow dance (oh yeah) in the same gym where the foul circles and the center court circle interlocked like strange Olympic symbols. Like Hammond, the school gym was the smallest in the known universe. I guess all those old Scots didn't want to spend the extra money on a real gym. It's funny how sometimes our olfactory sense creates a permanent smell memory. If I try real hard I can almost recreate the unique smell of that gym.

Regardless of the issues with the gym, school was a pretty cool place. One reason was that it was the newest building in town and was really modern by any measure. I can remember leaving the school on cold winter nights for away basketball games. The bus was semi warm and basically comfortable for the ride there, but the ride home was a different story. On the way home the bus was semi cold, but it helped if you had a girl to cuddle with until we reached Hammond. I will leave it at cuddle. Those with imaginations or experience riding semi cold busses can complete the visual.

School was also the place where proms were held. Man, were they ever major events. Decorating the gym in whatever theme was the buzz that year took a lot of work, but on the big night it was like a different place, sort of cool and wondrous. Men's attire two years in a row included white buck shoes...the word 'stylin'' comes to mind. Proms were quite an occasion. I think I learned more about life after the proms than at any other time of the school year.

I played at sports in school, but I lived in the shadow of a real jock, and was sometimes told I could never measure up to what my brother Pret achieved. I

believed that. However, the one place I could excel was band, so that became my passion until I left. I was a drummer. I loved marching band, playing in concerts going to sectionals, and I even made state choir one year, but couldn't go because I had chicken pox as I remember. The other day I reminisced about marching in Memorial Day parades. I don't remember how many, but I think we marched in three different parades on Memorial Days. We would play in one town, load up on the bus and head to the next etc. I want to think it was Morristown, Hammond and maybe Plessis was the last one.

Rock and roll wasn't the only outside influence making its way into the lives of the citizens of Hammond, TV was a huge change bringer. In 1953 we got our first TV. We also got a 53 Ford (you gotta google that). We were not the first in town to have a TV by any means so when we got ours; I already knew what my friends were watching etc. Now the TV itself was a big, square, black metal box with about a 17 inch screen that sat on a metal stand. It was a Zenith. I think it was called a table top model or something like that. It had big clunky dials on each side of the front, and smaller ones for picture adjustments. One was to change the channel. That one never got worn out because there only a few channels to change to and most of those were only available when the atmospheric were right. The other was for volume and it was used much more often than its counterpart. We had a tall antenna on a pole outside one of the attic windows. On many nights one of us would have to go up to the attic and turn the antenna to get the best possible picture and then tighten down the set screw to lock it in place. It was rather comical listening to my family shouting instructions to the person in the attic: "Turn it more, no not that way the other way...you went too far come back...you just passed it go back a little...right there...hold it." That was the brief version because the person in the attic often had interesting replies to those standing in the den watching the screen, dragging the process on for several minutes.

In the 50s the family watched Hockey Night in Canada on a channel out of Kingston. I think it was CKWS channel 11. That was when the NHL had six teams. Once in a while we could get a French language station out of Quebec, but that was only on really clear nights, and then only mom could understand the announcers. Watching TV in those days was an experience. Sometimes the pictures were crystal clear and that old black and white TV was the best, but on many occasions we watched hockey or Sunday afternoon football games in the middle of snow storms on the screen. Often the interference that made the picture look snowy was so bad we couldn't watch the game, or we would refuse to give up and sit

there watching shadowy figures moving across the screen. I think I watched many hockey games where we couldn't see the puck and we depended on the announcers to give us the image. It was sort of like listening to the radio only with serious eye strain.

Betty White, yes the same one, was a major TV star in those days with her show *Life With Elizabeth* which she also produced (1950s, woman producer, that's a big deal). I watched Disney and was fascinated by Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett. Westerns were my favorite though. My heroes were Roy Rogers, Hopalong Cassidy, Hoot Gibson and Lash LaRue. Then there was *I Love Lucy*, *The Honeyymooners* and other comedy shows. I also like detective stories and one of my favorites I watched with Reverend Campbell on Sunday nights before the Ed Sullivan show. He and I would sit in the den and watch *Charlie Chan Theater* while Mrs. Campbell and my parents would sit and talk in the living room. I really looked forward to those nights because he and I would have a running dialog trying to figure out who the bad guys were and how the Chans would catch them. He was cool. Now everyone watched the Ed Sullivan show. I remember one time when Elvis was on his show and the camera never showed him below the waist when he sang. There was a powerful lobby against showing Elvis' hips and leg gyrations; because many thought they were lewd and sinful. Never mind that the girls in the audience were screaming and some even throwing personal objects toward the stage. Never got a real good look at what those objects might have been.

As a farm community, Hammond pretty much ran on a seasonal clock. Well I always looked forward to mid-September. Most all the crops were harvested, and farmers now had a little extra time. It was Fair time! The highlight of the end of summer and the return to school. The fair was just flat awesome. Cows, bulls, calves, chickens, rabbits, etc. all congregated for judging at the McQueer farm in my front yard. The Grange Hall was where the cooking/baking competition took place, and organizations had booths and there were games and food and fun. For that fair weekend, Hammond existed in a universe apart from this world.

There is so much more I could write about and perhaps in another forum or at a different time that could happen. However, it is my hope that these ramblings have painted the outline of my Hammond that will be made bigger, better, and bolder by what others have to contribute.

Bill Lewis

