

I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live.

~George Bernard Shaw

Grandpa's Neighbor

It may sound strange, but one of my favorite places is an old family cemetery three miles west of Douglas, shaded by jackpines. It's cool and quiet there and it reminds me of a tiny community that existed more than a century ago. When I'm far away, I think of wind and Catharine and T.J. Smith and Philip Hunt and a tiny pine coffin laying in the grass next to a gaping black hole in the sod. Philip Hunt was not family, yet he stood there with his neighbors, hat in hand, black hair and beard ruffled in the wind. There weren't any jackpines then.

Philip had arrived in Nebraska from Hamilton, Ontario, in 1868. Grandma thinks he walked, but a county history says he accompanied his aunt, Sarah Jenkins. Maybe she walked, too, or perhaps Philip walked along beside her horse. Philip had a cousin who lived near Douglas, so he'd come to check it out. His aunt likely came to be with that cousin—a son or daughter.

Philip's visit to Nebraska lasted more than sixty years. He homesteaded next to Hiram and Sicily's daughter, Catherine, and her husband, Thomas Jefferson Smythe, a Scot who had Americanized his name to Smith. T.J. had arrived two years earlier after a detour in the Grand Army of the Republic fighting the Confederates on their own turf. The two men practiced a less rough and tumble style of Old World agriculture than many of their neighbors, with diversity and precision.

When T.J. got to the Nebraska Territory in February, 1866, he homesteaded in the Hendricks Precinct. Very soon, Catharine Hendricks noticed him at a camp meeting and rushed home to announce to her mother, Sicily, that she had met the man she was going to marry. Marry him she did, too, six months later, on August 12, 1866. By the time Philip arrived, Catharine carried their first-born son in her arms and their first-born daughter in her belly.

Philip brought his own romance that later enchanted his neighbor's daughters and, four generations later, touches me. Once established next to the Smiths, Philip sent money back to Canada to bring his fiancé and her brother to Nebraska. He hoped to save their lives in the drier Nebraska climate. Both suffered from "consumption," a disease we now call tuberculosis, and the months between Philip's departure and their arrival had severely altered their appearance. Both had become very thin and pale with hollow cheeks and sunken eyes.

Still he dared to hope. Philip saw to it that his bride-to-be and her brother took the black, tar-like medicine he kept warm on the back of the stove. Philip saw to their bloody handkerchiefs and kept his grief to himself as they got weaker. About all Philip's neighbors had to offer was to spell him during the endless hours of watching at his loved ones' bedsides and to help take care of whatever crops he'd established during that first season.

At last, Philip built caskets, one by one, from fresh pine boards and Catherine helped him wash the bodies and dress them for burial. The Smiths stood among the few mourners to share Philip's loss—sustained so far from home.



A couple of years after Philip buried his sweetheart, Catharine delivered her second daughter, a black-haired, black-eyed girl named by her father before her birth. When she turned out to be a girl, his only concession to little Frank's sex was her second name, Aurelia. A little

more than a year later, May 25, 1872, Philip shared the Smiths' celebration of another birth, James Monroe, nicknamed Munn. But two years after that, Philip built another, tiny coffin and stood at graveside with T.J. and Catharine. I wasn't there, but I can't imagine a March day in Nebraska when the wind didn't whip Catharine's skirts and the men's beards. The barbed wire fence that kept the cows out of the little cemetery would have sung as the Smiths buried their two-week-old son, Edward Arzie Ezia. The first handful of dirt they threw on the coffin probably blew back in their faces.

As Catharine gave birth to another seven, Philip got the first cigar and, as the child survived its first weeks, the first tentative smiles of relief. Philip may have seemed like an uncle to T.J. and Catharine's brood, but he was not family, as the first daughter, Ruilla Carsie, knew very well. Rill made eyes at him, as she passed through adolescence, but he didn't seem to notice, even a dozen years after he'd lost his sweetheart.

I wonder sometimes how the neighborhood, and particularly Philip, took the highjinks between T.J.'s dad and mom. Grandma Hazel said that her great-grandmother, Elsie Robeson Smythe, had lost two daughters at sea on the way to the United States. Then her oldest son, John, glimpsing glory, enlisted in the Twenty-seventh Iowa Infantry August 15, 1862. T.J. wanted to go, too, but he was only fifteen, so Elsie managed to dissuade him—for a while. Shortly after his seventeenth birthday, he enlisted in the Twenty-seventh, also.

Elsie may have received a few letters and, undoubtedly, news of the carnage reached Nebraska Territory. She waited in terror that she might lose another child. By the time they

mustered out, John on June 10, 1863, and T.J. on January 20, 1866, Elsie was losing her mind with worry. Then, Grandma said, if that wasn't enough, Elsie lost her husband.

No one alive remembers what happened between old Tom and Elsie. Maybe she blamed him for her daughters' deaths. Maybe it was *he* who wanted to go to the states. Maybe *she* had a nasty disposition. Perhaps Tom just had a wandering eye. Whatever the cause, Tom divorced Elsie and married a younger woman. Elsie moved in with T. J. and Catharine.

"T.J. had a house on top of a hill," Hazel said, "and my great-grandpa, Tom, had a homestead down the hill. Philip Hunt had homesteaded part of that same section. Great-grandmother was one of them people that got so she didn't know what she was doing. Today, they'd probably say she had Alzheimer's."

As she aged, Elsie settled deeper and deeper into dementia. She started wandering away from the house. I imagine that Philip guided her home sometimes, if he found her wandering on the prairie. Maybe she thought she was back in the highlands. Finally, T. J. and Catharine built her a room of her own where she could have her own, familiar things. When they had to be away for a few hours, they would lock her in her room.

Once when they were gone, though, Elsie found her way out. She wandered down the hill to where her former husband lived with his new wife. Old Tom and his bride also happened to be away from home that day, so no one knows how the fire started. When Tom got home, all he found was charred remains and the kitchen range in the basement with a pot of stew, a little overdone, still sitting on top.

They found Elsie sitting on a rock, humming a quiet, random little tune. A jig, perhaps. I wonder if she knew what she had done.

“But Great-grandpa just rebuilt the house,” Hazel said. “Finally, after his second wife died, he lived with T. J. and Grandma Catharine, too. All this happened long before I was born, and nobody ever said how they all got along there.”



Through all the goings on and carryings on, Philip remained a true and loyal friend. At a time when divorce was unheard of and mental illness shameful, he stood by to help construct another room, to search the hills and creek bottoms for a lost parent, to dig an iron kettle from among the charred ruins of a man’s home.

And of an evening, he would stride into T.J.’s yard with his pipe in his pocket. The men would drag some chairs out into the yard and watch the kids chasing fireflies. Catharine, too, may have brought along a chair and maybe a pan of beans to snap or cherries to pit or apples to peel and core. Maybe the old folks, Thomas and Elsie, would come out, too. It think it would be hard to carry on a grudge—or even a case of nerves—into the velvet black of a prairie night when it’s hard to see the border between twinkling stars and winking fireflies or hear the difference between chirping crickets and snapping beans.

Philip was still there, still single, when the Carpenter boys, William, George and Jasper, arrived at their cousin’s place near Bennett. William James Carpenter, back in Scioto County, Ohio, had put his living together in bits and pieces, farming his father’s worn-out land and cutting briars that grew up after every crop. He and his brothers cut long hook poles and split rails for the transcontinental railroad system just spreading out from the coast to coast trunk line. They foraged in the woods for medicinal herbs like ginseng and bloodroot and sassafras to sell at

the Daleyville drugstore. Despite all the time in the woods, they did manage to go to school a little bit, but William never got beyond the third grade.

In 1887, encouraged by glowing letters from their former neighbors and friends, the Williamses who had settled at Bennett, near Douglas, the Carpenters loaded a covered wagon and headed their mule team west. Their mother packed a picnic basket for them. I still have it.

“The day they left Ohio, their folks took some pictures of them and William, my dad, didn’t even have a coat. He borrowed a coat to get that picture taken,” Hazel said. “He was just a kid, just eighteen. He’d never been away from home. Uncle Jasper always told the story that he was so homesick on the way out. They said they learned him to chew tobacco so he wouldn’t be so lonesome.”

The Carpenter boys arrived in Bennett in early September, at the home of William Henry Williams. The following year, their parents, William and Sarah Jane, as well as a brother, Marion and sister, Ella, moved from Ohio to a place owned by Williams and located just east of Philip Hunt. Within a few years, George had a farm near Burr; Marion had a job in a blacksmith shop; and Jasper was laying track for the Missouri Pacific. Their dad worked for years as a section hand.

Will hired out as a farm hand, breaking virgin sod and preparing it for a first crop. Within his first six years in Nebraska, he had established solid employment on Philip Hunt’s place. In those days, a hired man might work with his boss as much as under him. Philip taught Will to bud and graft, how to plant a grape arbor and how to breed horses. That’s where he got started breeding Percherons, the big heavy-muscled work horses. T.J. and Philip continued to trade work, including community projects like the Willow Line, the first telephone line in their area,

which they hung on willow poles. Will took part in those work parties too. He undoubtedly got to know the Smith girls as he whistled and whittled out in T.J. and Catharine's front yard with Philip and T.J.

The first born, Rill, had already attained the ripe age of eighteen when Will arrived. In fact, she was a couple of months older than the young stranger out whistling in the fields. He soon caught her eye and "because he was good-looking and all, she kind of made a play for him," his sister, Ella, later confided in Grandma Hazel. Will's interests were elsewhere and Rill didn't marry until she was thirty-five years old. She worked around for people like all girls did then, attending births with her mother who was taking over Grandma Sicily's practice and staying for a couple of weeks to help the new mother.

"Some way or another," Hazel said, Will became interested in "that little black-eyed girl," the second girl, Frank. Perhaps Will liked Frank's toughness that took her into the fields with her brothers, planting corn and walking behind the horses, harrowing the fields with a tree limb. Or maybe he admired the intelligence and persistence that led her to earn her teaching certificate from Bennett Academy. Before she taught even a semester, though, she got sick with the scarlet fever that Grandma blamed for her progressive hearing loss.

As she recovered, she kept house for her older brother, Charlie and Will tried to persuade her to forget about teaching school and make her career teaching him. Starting September 6, 1893, she did. That Wednesday, Will and Frank, along with her brother Charlie and Nellie Sutton, drove a team to Lincoln. At the courthouse, Will and Frank began a life together that lasted almost sixty-two years. Charlie and Nellie were married in a nearby Seventh Day Adventist Church.

Hired men often lived in their employers' houses then. Hazel remembers a succession of men her father hired after he got his own place. Usually, they bunked with her brothers, except one old guy who couldn't stay away from the bottle. He bunked in the barn. When Will and Frank returned to Douglas on their wedding night, they returned to Philip's house. That was exceptional and Philip's hired couple gradually filled every nook and cranny of the lower floor. In addition to a farm laborer, Philip got a cook, housekeeper, laundress and gardener, although none of them seemed to think of it that way. In return for Will's and Frank's labor and that of the children who arrived at about two-and-a-half-year intervals, Philip provided generously. They all had the use of the frame house he had built with his own hands for the bride who never really shared it. There were two gambrel-roofed barns, a bricked cave, a sweet well, a magnificent orchard Philip had planted and grafted, his grape arbors and about three quarter-sections of farm land.

In addition to Frank and Will and their family, Philip took in others who needed a place to go. For a time when there was only one child, Will's grandfather, old Henry Carpenter, lived there. Senility had robbed him of his mind and, like Elsie, he would wander away.

"Mom couldn't take care of him for more than a few months," Hazel said. "She couldn't chase him down because she was pregnant with me. So Dad took him down by Burr to Uncle George Carpenter.

Another time, Will's brother, Jasper, was the guest.

"Jasper was a guy that wandered around a lot," Grandma said. "Next year after he and Dad and George come out here, he went back and got Aunt Mollie and brought her out and got

married. One year, they thought Arkansas would be a great place to go. So they got them a team of mules and a covered wagon and went to Arkansas. They went broke down in Arkansas and they come back with a team of pretty yellow, maybe sorrel, horses and a baby colt. They come back in the fall . . . and Philip had a great big granary out there. Two rooms. I don't know how it come that it wasn't full of grain. Must have been a poor year and they hadn't shelled the corn yet.

“Course they had everything they owned in that covered wagon—stove and everything. They moved in that granary and lived in there all winter. That winter, Mollie's sister come from Denver. She had a daughter, Pearl . . . they come and stayed with Aunt Mollie for a while in the granary.”

Grandma said that Philip's family in Canada also sent him a nephew, John, to nurse. Like Philip's sweetheart and her brother, John had consumption. Frank helped with the doses of “tar” kept on the warming oven. For Philip it must have seemed a terrible task. He'd already lost his most beloved sweetheart to the same scourge. This time, though, the patient recovered. How Philip and the Carpenter family avoided infection remains unexplained.

“He was always helping somebody out,” Hazel said. “Any of the Smith boys, if they needed a little help or something financial, he was always helping them. He didn't make a big thing of it or anything. He never expected it back.”

“Philip's house was our house, only we wasn't allowed to go into his rooms,” Hazel said. “There was a crawl hole back over the top of the kitchen and he had a lot of stuff stored in there. I think us kids snooped once in a while. We had a woodshed. Us kids prowled around

there one time and found a tin can with a lot of money in it. Believe me, we put it back in a hurry. We knowed who it belonged to.

“We had peaches and applies and cherries. “There was three big apple trees. They was yellow transparent. They was early summer apples. Real early. We set up in them trees and eat apples. They was a beautiful place to set up in there and eat apples.

“We eat them and we made pies out of them and made applesause, but they wasn’t a canning apple. We couldn’t get them out of the top of the tree, but they’d fall on the ground and the ground would be covered and we always were barefooted. And we’d get stung with the bees. Philip always had bees. He probably had ten hives. We always had honey.

“He had all kinds of fruit. He had apple trees that he grafted two or three different kinds of apples on. We had lots of apples. Just gorgeous apples. I can still taste them. The apples on the ground in the winter—a lot of times the leaves would cover them up and we’d go out and dig them up and eat them froze. He had all kinds of berries and everything you ever heard of. He had blackberries and grape vines.

“The garden was fenced with white picket fence. Everything on the place was painted. One time he wanted to paint the barn. He set out there on a stump and broke up bricks. Mixed the brick dust with turpentine and linseed oil and painted that great big barn. He painted all the outbuildings with that. He had us kids once in a while bringing up bricks for him.

“He was a great hand for flowers and shrubs. He had these roses, just a common rose. Seems like I can remember white ones and pink ones and red ones. He probably had yellow ones, but I can’t remember them. He kept them trimmed up pretty good. We had tiger lilies, too. During the nine years Frank and Will lived with him, Philip worked less and less in the fields and barns, devoting himself to the orchard and the flower beds.”

The family and Philip would sit around the kitchen table in the evenings, reading.

“When us kids were growing up, Mom would send to Sears and Roebuck. She sent for every book she could get ahold of. She was the person that learned us to read. Our evenings in the winter was spent around the kitchen table with the lamp in the middle. Usually we’d pop corn and have a bowl of apples.

In spring and summer, her dad and Philip would sit out on the porch and talk by the hour, “just set there and whittle, out in the sun.” Sometimes they didn’t say a word. When the evening was particularly hot, the three adults would often drag the chairs out in the yard, watch the air fill with fireflies, and talk, over the sound of snapped green beans clanging into a pot.

Hazel found Philip a bit intimidating.

“Philip Hunt wasn’t too good with little kids. He was kind of standoffish. We thought he was cranky. We was kind of scared of him. He wasn’t mean or anything, but he would boss us a little bit. As we grew up, though, we grew with him some way or another. We all liked Philip, ever one of us.”

Grandma remembers days at Philip’s place, playing house in the orchard where she and her sisters marked off rooms with binder twine. They were still at Hunt’s place when Uncle Earl was born . . . and Grandma Hazel . . . and Aunt Edna . . . and Uncle Lawrence.

Shortly after Lawrence was born, Philip decided that was just enough children and he moved in with his nephew, James Ratliffe, who lived on another of his farms near Panama, Nebraska. Philip was leaving his own house that he’d built with his own hands to the hired help. I found that incomprehensible, but Grandma said that nobody thought about it that way. She

couldn't say exactly how they did think about it except that the Ratliffe house was bigger and the family smaller.

Philip retired then (he was fifty-seven) and turned the place over to Will who bought the equipment and the draft horses. In 1904, Frank had another baby, Norma, in Philip's house. But it was still Philip's land and in summer of 1907, just before Frank had her last baby, Mahlon, the Carpenters bought their own place.

Ten years later, Will and Frank moved half a state away to Webster County. Grown up and married by then, Frank's daughter, my grandma moved with my grandpa onto Will's and Frank's place.

"Philip walked from Panama down to our place. That was about seven or eight miles. He walked there one morning. He said, 'I had to see how you folks was getting along.' Philip Hunt was the walkinest man you ever saw. He could outwalk anybody . . ." Hazel said of him. "I can't remember of Philip ever a'riding a horse. He could walk to Lincoln about as quick as you could drive up there with a horse. He'd start out early in the morning to do some business in Lincoln and he'd be back by dinnertime. You know, he used to own the Post Office block downtown—the Old Post Office on P Street, between Ninth and Tenth."

A walk to Lincoln meant that Philip would have to walk forty miles round trip and still have time to take care of business. She said he would come swinging back into the yard at evening just as fresh as when he left.

"He was a magnificently-built man," Hazel said. "He was probably six foot. His hair was pretty long and it was coal black. He always wore shoes like the railroad men wear, with real thick soles. They was real heavy."

He wanted to buy some land out near Frank and Will, and Hazel thought her Dad helped him look. Sometimes the Carpenters would drive back to Otoe County and bring him out for a visit. Other times he'd walk out. It's almost one hundred twenty-five miles.



At the end, when Philip couldn't care for himself anymore, his nephew took him to Webster County to stay with Will and Frank. They sat with him during his last days after his stroke. When he died June 22, 1930, Frank and Will took him back to Douglas and buried him beside his beloved and near several generations of my family.

In return for their years of friendship and the last few months of caring for him, Philip left the Carpenters a quarter section of land where Grandma Hazel and Grandpa George were living then. Hazel and George bought a second quarter from the estate. Those two quarters became the core of what I now call the "Home Place."

"After he was gone, Grandpa, Dad, and Ratliffe went out to his place. He'd left directions that they found out at the farm. They went out and dug up two or three cans of money—tin cans, sealed up and buried. I think there was one can of \$20 gold pieces, but mostly it was folding money. It seems like money just kinda come to him some way.

"Philip Hunt had a car. It was a two cylinder. He never run it very much. He thought he could walk faster. It hung in the granary at his cousin's. When he died, they sold it for a relic."

As I leaf through the transcripts of my interviews with Grandma, I find Philip time after time, sauntering into and out of my family's daily routines. He died after sixty-two years neighboring and mentoring three generations of my family. No better friend is likely to stroll into our lives.

He left us much more than the land. He left us a tradition of community that takes care of its own. Today, communities don't birth our babies any more like they did in Grandma Hendricks' time. Neighbors don't sit with our sick and dying. Hired help don't live in the boss's house, even though the houses are bigger and fewer people occupy them. We don't have hired help; don't hire the neighbors' kids to give them a start in life.

We have truly become a nation of strangers who wouldn't think to walk a mile just to see how the young folks are getting along. I suspect it's cost us dearly. When I think of the stress the average American faces, I suspect a good portion of it is fear. If we don't have those deep relationships with our neighbors, we have no reason to think that, when we need help, it will be forthcoming like it was when Will Carpenter started out and Philip Hunt ended up and for all those times in between.