

## “Kenneth Poore and How I Met Him”

by: Mark J. Winer, President, The Poore Family Foundation

I was living in Stewartstown and renting a house from Gary Cross on Route 145 in 1973. I had a 1966 white Ford Station Wagon and in the spring of 1974, I was traveling up 145 going home.

I happened to see this old man in tattered overalls walking up the road. He was shuffling along with a somewhat off white battered hat. I thought to myself, "I don't need to just give rides to young people. I'm going to see if this old guy needs a ride." I was 25 at the time. I pulled off the road just past him and put my head out the window.

Before I could say anything, I found myself looking up into a wizened old face with the sparkling twinkling blue eyes of a 5-year-old boy.

"I guess you're looking for me," he said.

"Why yes I am." I replied. "Would you like a ride?"

"No, I live right here," he said nodding to the farm house set back from the road behind some really big maple trees.

"Well then, we are neighbors. I live in the house around the bend. I am renting it from Gary Cross and his wife."

"I heard there was a hippie in the neighborhood", he said.

That is how Kenneth and I met. I started coming down to his place. I would help him pitch hay for his one cow, Sunset Sue.

I would bring my own food and have dinner with him. I was pretty much eating vegan then, though the word vegan had not been invented yet.

Kenneth was living almost entirely out of the living room then. There was a parlor stove and he would cook on it. He did have a cook stove in the kitchen but at age 88, (almost 89- his birthday was July 5th) he just found it easier to stick to the living room and his bedroom. He would get meals on wheels food delivered daily during the week and he was "getting along."

When I came to visit, we would eat, talk, and then lapse into silence. It was not like most uncomfortable silences where your mind kept going, wondering what to say next. It was a comfortable silence. Kenneth was 63 years older than I, and about the same age as my grandparents. Both my grandfathers had past away before I really got a chance to know them as an adult.

Kenneth or J.C. Kenneth Poore (John Calvin Kenneth Poore) was born in the bed he was sleeping on July 5 1885. Everyone called and knew him as Kenneth. He had a telephone but no electricity. Water ran from a spring up into his metal sink in the kitchen and into the water room where it filled a basin of about 30 gallons before draining out and down the hill to the Hog Barn. He used to tie string to glass bottles of milk and use this tub of cold spring water as his refrigerator year round.

"Why didn't you ever get electricity since you have a phone?" I asked.

Kenneth replied: "Never needed it and my housekeeper Alfa said she didn't either. I never wanted to have more bills to pay that I couldn't afford as I got older, neither."

The next fall, the old Ford wagon barely made it back to New York and I was living with some friends in

Manhattan. I Missed Kenneth's 90th birthday, but I heard that the town of Stewartstown had a parade for him and declared it J.C. Kenneth Poore Day. I saw the pictures of him in the local paper.

I worked at a sporting goods store, off Union Square and in the evening at a bar off Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village but nothing was really happening for me there.

I got a letter from a mutual friend living in Clarksville, NH, Sini Foskett. She told me that Kenneth had a fall and spent the night outside. His neighbors Alice Flanders and Ida Gould (both about 10 years his junior) would be sure to call him every day. When he did not answer, they called for help.

They found Kenneth out by the barn where he had slipped and fallen. He was unable to get up. They took him to the hospital where besides some bumps and bruises, he was diagnosed with exposure and malnutrition. He had a hankering for potatoes and boiled them up everyday on his woodstove. He just did not feel like eating anything else.

At the time, there was a man, Paul Pierce and his family who were living at the Hollow store in Stewartstown, just down the road from the Poore Farm. They took Kenneth in but they were going to leave the area soon and Kenneth was bound for the County Farm. The County Farm is the Coos County Nursing Home and Jail. Yes, it is true, though the two parts are quite separate. There, the cooks used to prepare food for both sides. I know of this because I cooked there one summer with my friend and now fellow Board member of the Poore Family Foundation, John Lanctot.

When I heard of Kenneth's situation I actually hitch hiked up from NYC to Stewartstown to see him. Back then I was not a stranger to hitchhiking.

When I got there, Kenneth was upstairs above the store.

I do not know exactly what came over me but, after we talked for a while I asked him, " What would you think if I came back up here and we moved into your house?" He lit up and said, " Sure, that would be great!"

Job Poore was Kenneth's grandfather he bought the farm from Moses Heath and moved the family up to Stewartstown. Kenneth's father was John Calvin Poore who fought in the Civil War. His mother Emma had three children: Ormond John Poore born in 1866 (right after John Calvin returned from the war), Hattie Poore born 1874, and John Calvin Kenneth Poore born 1885.

Kenneth grew up as, what I like to call, an American Victorian. He had a very strict and somewhat rigid moral code, tempered with a deep sense of community and humor.

Kenneth loved to get visitors and no matter what he was doing, he would always stop and socialize. Even if he was dressed in his tattered work overalls, if a woman came by he would always remove his battered hat and be polite.

Kenneth told me that he went to a one-room schoolhouse. After finishing the forth reader he had a decision to make, become a Naturalist or become a Farmer. He chose the latter, for as he said. "You got to do a lot of different things." The Poore Family had a few head of dairy cows, geese, and chickens, raised pigs, grew hops and wheat, and had a large kitchen garden. Kenneth hunted and trapped. He blamed his arthritic,

gnarled and bent fingers on the cold water he put them into when trapping for beaver.

Kenneth loved to read and over the years wrote for the local newspapers. He also learned photography and taxidermy, all without electricity.

His sense of humor was outstanding and though just 5'-4" tall and 140 pounds he loved his food. Breakfast with him was an event. On the wood cook stove, he had a kettle that was for boiling potatoes. He'd get that going and get some coffee brewing in a percolator, fry up some bacon in a pan and put some of the bacon grease in another fry pan. When the potatoes were ready, he would slice them up and fry them in the bacon grease. He would crack an egg over the bacon and cook that up while toasting some bread on the stove. The coffee is now perking merrily away and breakfast is ready. Eggs fried in bacon fat, potatoes fried in bacon fat, toast with butter, hot coffee with sugar and milk, a donut and a nice piece of sharp cheddar cheese with a second cup of coffee, were his mainstay.

This was morning fare in Winter-Spring-Summer and fall. Mind you, Kenneth lived until he was 98 years old. Although he did eventually die of a heart attack.

When running became very popular in the 1970's Kenneth would scoff and say, "I don't need to run. I am a working man."

At 90 he would split wood and keep busy everyday. He would do physical therapy for his legs, which he had hurt when he fell and he improved and got stronger.

He knew quite a bit about 'natural remedies.' As I said, he loved to eat. In the spring he would gather young dandelion greens and boil them up with salt pork.

I mention the greens especially for a reason and a story.

One day two local high school girls came to Kenneth and asked him if he would help them with a school project. They were researching old cures and remedies. Kenneth happily agreed but asked for a few days to prepare a list for them, they agreed to come back the next week and interview Kenneth.

Kenneth with a list and the girls sat in the living room at the small wooden table. Kenneth would read, "Peppermint.....good for digestion. Slippery Elm bark soaked in cold water....makes a good cough medicine." While Kenneth was reading the girls were taking notes. Next, "Dandelion greens picked young in the springtime....." Kenneth stopped and left that hanging. Finally one of the girls said, "Mr. Poore what does that cure?"

He looked up from his list and declared, "HUNGER!" and broke into laughter. He thought that to be very funny. After a bit he explained it to them and they finished their interview. I expect their project was a success. You see Kenneth did not just come up with a funny line here and there. He would plan these jokes of his.

The most memorable of his little jokes was to do with the Jehovah Witnesses. The Witnesses used to come and visit Kenneth regularly. He loved to visit with people and never turned anyone away.

Once during a conversation Kenneth told me that he considered himself a

Methodist though he hardly ever attended any church services. One time when the Jehovah Witnesses came

a calling, and there were about four in this group, Kenneth invited them in and sat in his chair by the parlor stove.

I was there to bare witness to this story. A very nice woman starting speaking about their ideals and how things on Earth and heaven would be.

Note, Kenneth had lost his teeth and was a bit unkempt on this day and he loved to wear his moth-eaten old grey sweater.

As the woman spoke on Kenneth seems to "space out", his eyes closed and his jaw went slack. The woman was done and there now hung a deep silence over the room.

"Mr. Poore?" she said.

"No." he responded.

"No, don't want to go." he repeated with his eyes closed and slumped in his chair.

"No what Mr. Poore? You don't want to go where?"

"Don't want to go to Heaven" said Kenneth.

"Mr. Poore, why don't you want to go to heaven?"

He opened his eyes, looked over at her and her companions and said in a loud voice, "Too many Jehovah's there!"

Then he burst out laughing and slapped his knee.

(I was sitting at a wooden table in the middle of the room and I almost fell out of my chair. I could not believe that he had set this up!)

This was brilliant. The Witnesses did not know what to say. Kenneth proceeded to ask them if they wanted any coffee and told them he would take their literature but could not promise if he would read it.

Yes, brilliant! His little show told his visitors, in no uncertain terms, that he was still quite in charge of his life. He welcomed them back anytime to come and visit, but there was no way that he was going to become a Jehovah's Witness. Brilliant, he used humor not anger to get his point across.

Kenneth was born in 1885 and was a young man when automobiles first came to the North Country. He told me of a time when a friend and neighbor drove up with a new Model T Ford automobile. He gave Kenneth a ride and showed him how to drive this horseless buggy. Kenneth asked if he could take it out for a spin and the friend agreed.

Kenneth took off South of Route 145 and hung a right onto Bishop Brook Road. He was having a grand old time and when he hit Route 3 he took a left and went into the town of West Stewartstown. There the local Sheriff flagged him down. "Kenneth, where is your drivers license?" asked the Sheriff. Kenneth told me that he looked him in the eye and said, "The Jokes on you! I don't have one!" Kenneth broke out into his famous laugh. The Sheriff, let Kenneth off and told him to take that car home and not drive again until he got a license.

In his life Kenneth never did get a license or own a car, he drove his team of grays and a buggy to town, well into the 1960s.

