

A Conversation with Mr. Homer Kunz - December 31, 2001

Homer and June Kunz are a delightful couple who have led an interesting and gratifying life. Homer's parents came from Switzerland, and June's were Norwegian. (That Norwegian blood is "why the kids are so mean," he says with a chuckle.) The Kunzes have lots of friends, and I had been hearing about them for years. I very much appreciate this opportunity to learn more about life here on the mountain, especially some of Homer's experiences.

Celebration of Swiss and Norwegian Heritages

What an enjoyable way to spend the morning on the last day of 2001 — chatting with Homer and June Kunz and their son John in the elder Kunzes' comfortable kitchen. We sipped hot coffee and were treated to fresh-from-the-oven beer bread and Springerli, traditional Swiss Christmas cookies flavored with anise. These are rolled cookies, decorated in raised designs that are formed using a special rolling pin. Homer's great grandfather had carved the rolling pin from which these cookies were made.

June's Norwegian heritage is celebrated here, as well. Another Christmas sweet that is a favorite with the Kunzes is the Norwegian Christmas cake, Julekaker, made from a cardamom-flavored recipe that has been passed down through June's family. Homer also speaks of a fruit called the cloudberry from which Norwegians make jams and jellies. Each 6-inch plant produces one berry at the top, looking a little like a gooseberry. Because the growing season in Norway is so short, "whatever grows has to get it done in a hurry. ... It has to almost do it overnight."

June hails from a long line of Norwegian sea captains, many of whom commanded the old sailing ships. Her father was a sailor. En route from Norway to the United States, the ship on which he was serving was carrying carbide. During a storm the carbide ignited, and a fire broke out. Because he was injured in the fire, he had to remain in a hospital in the United States when his ship returned to Norway. He made his way to Chicago, where he met June's mother. Although he could hardly speak English, he was drafted in World War I. He made a career of sailing: first on Lake Michigan and later between Cuba and Fort Lauderdale, where Homer caught up with June. But I am getting ahead of myself ...

Some Background: the Swiss Colony at Gruetli

A Swiss colony was established at Gruetli-Laager in the late 1880s. When founder Peter Staub advertised the proposed colony, both in Switzerland and here in the United States, he published drawings that led people to believe that they would find fields to cultivate. When the colonists arrived, they found that the land was actually

forested. Though disappointed, they weren't quitters. "They fought it out and made some nice farms."

Homer, who spent a lot of time in the colony when he was growing up, said that all of the families made cheese, wine, and bread. They bought hardly anything at the store except sugar and coffee. Rose Marie Stampfli was still making and selling cheese as recently as the 1970s.

When they were building the Episcopal church in Gruetli-Laager, Eugene Nussbaum came up with the idea of calling it "St. Bernard's," after the Catholic monks in the Swiss Alps who bred and raised the rescue dogs. Bishop Maxon dedicated the church when it was completed.

Some of the colonists later migrated to Belvidere and some to Tracy City (Dutch Town). The name "Dutch Town," like Dutch Maid Bakery, is from Deutschland (Germany). It has nothing to do with Holland.

Grundy County Industry

There have been basically three industries in Grundy County: first coal mining, then later the timber industry, and, of course, moonshining. At one time, "there was a still on every branch in the woods." As Homer puts it, "People had to feed their families. That [making moonshine] was one way to do it." Everybody must have done it — he has a photo that he took of himself with a moonshine still "in the colony" (Gruetli) in the woods near Peter Haus Creek.

Tennessee Coal and Iron Company owned the mine, and local men worked for low pay under adverse conditions, reminiscent of those in Tennessee Ernie Ford's song, "Sixteen Tons." The miners were paid in "script," redeemable only at the company store.

In 1891, the men organized and went on strike. In response, the company contracted with the State to use convicts — most of them black — to work the mine. This put the local miners out of work, and people were almost starving to death. One night, a group of local miners climbed the walls of the stockade where the prisoners were housed and set it on fire. They captured the convicts, marched them to the train and ordered the engineer to "take them back to Nashville."

The stockade was rebuilt, and the prisoners were returned to the mine. However, the local men continued their rebellion. Two years later, their last battle brought the state militia here to guard the prisoners and hunt down the local miners. The uprising finally ended in 1896. Soon thereafter, the coal seam played out, and the mine was closed.

Homer's Parents

Homer's parents were named Mary and John. (Mary was baptized Marie Magdalene, and people — including John — called her Marie in her younger years. Later, everyone called her Mary.) Although they did not know each other in Switzerland, they were from the same canton in Bern. They met in Hohenwald in Lewis County, Tennessee, where they were pioneer settlers, members of the Swiss colony there.

Mary had immigrated from Switzerland with her parents when she was one year old. They settled in New York City, where her five siblings were subsequently born. Teddy Roosevelt, who was then the city's Chief of Police, lived nearby, and Mary played with his daughter Alice. Her father, who worked in a bank, was waylaid and killed one night by robbers, under the mistaken assumption that he was carrying a lot of money.

This left his widow with six children to raise. She took the younger children and moved to Hohenwald, and she sent Mary back to live with her sister in Bern to attend millinery school. Mary later studied in Paris, and as a result she could speak French as well as German and English. Beginning in the 1930s, she kept a diary for the rest of her life. It was so complete and historically accurate that journalists were known to check their facts with her. She lived to be 96 years old.

Homer's father, John, was from the region of high mountain meadows in Switzerland where Emmenthaler cheese was produced; his hometown is now the site of a training school for cheese making. (Emmen is the name of a river; "thal" means "valley.") The people drive the cows up to the meadows every spring and stay with them through the summer. They make cheese all summer, store it in caves, and bring it down in the fall. (When Homer and June visited Switzerland, they bought two rounds of "young cheese," ate one and forgot the other in their suitcase. "That little thing made Limburger. We had to throw it out of the train window!")

John, who had a college education, came to the United States at the age of 17, unable to speak a word of English. A naturalized American citizen, he helped survey Hohenwald and was its first postmaster. Then he took a job with the railroad — was the Westinghouse air brake inspector in Nashville. Too many trains were losing their brakes and going off the Mountain Goat track near Sewanee, so the railroad sent John here to correct the situation. The Kunzes knew several Swiss families at Gruetli, so they decided to stay. Homer particularly remembers Bud Werner's mother Bea, a well-educated woman who was a good friend of Mary's.

In those days, Tracy City had a large freight yard where John worked as a car inspector and air brake man. Also, there was a narrow gauge "dinky line" railroad that ran all over the Werner land. Some of those grades may have been 5 to 6%, and the Werners used a Shay engine to pull them. The Shay was a worm-gear engine

made for power to climb steep grades. It had two vertical pistons and made a lot of noise, but it did the trick. (In contrast, the grade up the mountain at Sewanee is probably about 2%, which a steamer engine could climb.)

"It was very frontier-ish" when John and Mary Kunz moved to Tracy City, around 1913. "There wasn't much law and order — Tracy City was more-or-less a mining camp." Mr. Kunz bought his wife a double-barreled 28-gauge shotgun to protect herself. "She could really shoot that thing." They built a house (Homer's childhood home) on the site of the present Meadowwood housing development. They got electricity there sometime in the '20s, when Homer was in grammar school.

Growing Up in Tracy City

There's a story that Homer and his twin brother Herman changed the route of the main road through Tracy City, resulting in the curve right below the old high school. They had a little mine in the side of the hill there. Men from the Department of Transportation had put out stakes to mark the new roadbed, and they had it running straight through the mine. "We moved a bunch of the stakes," and people say the road construction crew poured the asphalt right where the boys had rerouted the road around the mine.

Homer remembers a visit from a lady who was wearing a lifelike fur piece, possibly silver fox and probably very expensive, around her shoulders. "She laid it on a chair — we [Herman and I] called the dog on it, 'Sic 'em!' and he jumped on that thing! We got a good whipping over that one — we got a dandy. My brother said, 'I knew it was a cat!'"

Homer's mother often made cheese when he was growing up. He says it's not complicated — it just takes a lot of time. They made Schmierkäs (cottage cheese) and put Schnittlauch (cut up chives) in it. "Our family raised everything we ate. The only can I ever saw come out of a store contained sardines. They were a nickel a can."

There were several mineral springs in this area, and people would come to stay and drink the water for their health. These included Winchester Springs (which was high in sulfur), Beersheba Springs, and a chalybeate spring at White's Hotel near Tracy City. Mrs. McCord, a lady who drove a horse and buggy to deliver mail to the hotel twice a week, lived below the Kunzes. If she thought she was going to run late and have to come home after dark, she would get one of the Kunz children to ride with her. So Homer got to ride up there sometimes. After business waned, the hotel stood empty for years before it burned. Young men, including Homer, used to camp in it.

He attended St. Andrews School for his junior year. "There was a lot of traffic" up and down a trail through the woods between St. Andrew's and Roark's Cove, because for years people walked up the mountain to go to the Episcopal church at St. Andrew's. (Later, the Kirby-Smiths built a "little bitty chapel" in Roark's Cove, and many people there named their children for the priests — Gailor, Quintard, and Claiborne — who served that church and later became bishops. The church, which has since burned, was located next to a school that is also no longer there.)

This mountain trail was called "Jacob's Ladder," because the sight of the lanterns held by the line of people walking it after dark reminded them of the Biblical story of Jacob's ladder. The trail went down the mountain along the long ridge about 100 yards north of Piney Point, near where the water tank at the old farm at St. Andrew's stood. There is a sinkhole right beside the trail.

On occasion, Homer would walk down the Jacob's Ladder trail to square dances held in Roark's Cove. Most of those houses had a dog trot, which they would clear out for the dances. The dances would last nearly all night, after which Homer would walk back up the mountain and slip back into the dormitory.

Back at Grundy County High School for his senior year, Homer joined a Future Farmers Band, composed of five boys: Homer played the harmonica; Auburn King and E. H. Barker, the guitar; Paul Thomas, the Jews harp, and Jim Myers, the fiddle. "The Grand Ole Opry was just getting started, and they were hunting for people to play. We went up and played about fifteen minutes one time. "

The Opry was very small then. It was located on the top floor of the National Life and Casualty Insurance Company building on Capitol Square in Nashville. Other performers that Homer remembers from that night were Uncle Dave Macon, Dr. Humphrey Bates and the Possum Hunters, the Cooke Brothers Band, and a short black railroad porter named Deford Bailey. Mr. Bailey, who performed in his uniform, played "The Fox Chase" on the harp (harmonica), using a 1-pound coffee can as an amplifier.

Homer graduated from Grundy County High School in 1931. That building, which has since burned, was located on the site of the football field for the high school building in Tracy City.

On His Own

For awhile after high school, he did construction: plumbing and carpentry. After the Depression, he went to work on a farm in Iowa for \$1 a day plus board. "This was before the 8-hour day was invented. I milked cows in the dark — before sunrise and after sunset. Never did know the color of them!"

In 1939 Homer went to Florida, "looking for June," as he puts it. June says the real story is that she "had to chase him all the way back to Tennessee." However it happened, they settled on the mountain, and Homer decided he wanted to get into the construction business. He took a correspondence course in blueprint reading, and after several years he got a contractor's license.

Homer built many of the buildings on the University of the South campus, as contractor on some and supervisor on others. The buildings include the forestry building (which cost \$114,000, a lot of money in those days), duPont Library, the science building, the Bishop's Common, the Juhan gymnasium, several dorms (Malon Courts, Trezevant, and Hunter), and several fraternity houses (SAE, Fiji, and Chi Psi). He was general foreman on the expansion and remodeling of All Saints' Chapel and the construction of the nurses' home (Phillips). He enlarged the first Emerald-Hodgson hospital and was the advisor on the construction of the new Emerald-Hodgson, because the foreman didn't know Sewanee. "Building at Sewanee is different," Homer says.

The Bishop's Common was constructed right across Alabama Avenue, blocking it off. One evening when Homer was at the site, a student who had been drinking drove up Alabama Avenue in a big yellow car and ran right off the road. As he stumbled out of the car, the confused student exclaimed, "There ought to be a road here!"

An interesting note about the remodeling of the Chapel: they used a crane to remove in one piece each of the trusses that had held up the old roof. Those massive trusses, made from hemlock, now support the roof of the picnic pavilion at Lake Cheston.

Homer also built several private homes at Sewanee, including those of the Charles Foremans, Quintard Joyners, and George Ramseurs along the bluff near Proctors Hall, and Edward King's near Clara's Point.

Up until the 1950s, Tracy City had no waterworks. The Grundy Lakes area had been a coal mine, and the seams angled down toward the center of the hill. They had had problems with water collecting in the lower areas of the mine, so years earlier someone had dug a tunnel under the mine to drain the water. Water ran out of that tunnel continuously, like a spring. In 1954, Homer and businessman C. W. Hale formed a partnership to dam the tunnel with concrete and install a pumping station, providing Tracy City with its first public water system.

Raising a Family

When Homer's father bought the property where the Kunzes now live, it was forested. Homer and Herman cleared much of the land and sold the timber. Homer and June built the house before they had electricity or running water. Until the

1950s, the powerlines running out of Tracy City stopped at the apple orchard, and those coming from Monteagle went only as far as Summerfield. Both their Aladdin lamp and stove burned coal oil (kerosene). June bathed the children (Lynda, John, and Fritz) in the kitchen sink, using water from their well.

One evening, Homer and June were outside canning, using the light from a carbide lantern to see. All of a sudden, he started smacking her on the head — he had accidentally caught her hair on fire and was trying to put it out. Luckily he succeeded, and there was no real harm done.

The children loved growing up close to nature, and Fritz, particularly, was always interested in animals. Currently, he is making an extensive collection of the insects of this area.

As children, Fritz and Lynda used to uncover copperhead snakes around the bluff, bring them home and dissect them. Once Fritz brought a flying squirrel in the house, and somehow it got under Lynda's bed. They chased it out and then under John's bed, and it was up to Homer to get it out. John slept through the excitement, but the next morning wanted to know, "What was Daddy doing under my bed?"

Then there was the time John tried to slip into the house and into bed late at night. A surprised John landed on the floor instead: Fritz had carefully made his bed up — after taking the mattress off!

At school one day, Fritz found a live bat out on the playground. He took it inside and asked his teacher what to do with it. Without looking up, she replied, "Oh, just put it in the corner with the rest of the bats." Wrong kind of bat!

One evening, the three kids were studying in the living room. Homer, who had been out in his woodworking shop, came in with an idea for them. "Hey, boys!" he called out. They yelled back, "It wasn't me! I didn't do it!" Hmmm ...

Father Adamz - the Apostle of the Mountain

Father Alphonso Constantine Adamz was an Episcopal priest who came to serve Christ Church in Tracy City in about 1926, starting before he was ordained. June remembers that when Father Adamz first laid eyes on her infant John, he said the baby "looked just like a monkey." June, who laughs about it now, was offended at the time. "John was a lovely baby - he *was* a little bit red!"

In addition to serving as the parish priest, Father Adamz was the scoutmaster, and according to Homer he "did more to change the lives of a bunch of kids" than anyone who's lived here. Known affectionately as "the apostle of the mountain," Father Adamz "straightened out a lot of boys' lives."

The troop's Boy Scout museum, the largest in the world, was exhibited at the Chicago World's Fair. Father Adamz took it with him when he left Christ Church for Sewanee. When Father Adamz retired, Homer and some others took it to Camp Mountainlake for storage and then later they moved it to the courthouse attic. Sadly it deteriorated, and although Carlton Ray Parmaly has some of it, most of it no longer exists.

Glancey Sherman of Sherman and Hall gave land at Foster Falls for a Boy Scout camp and land on the Sequatchie for the Girl Scouts. The camp at Foster Falls is named Father Adamz Camp; that on the Sequatchie is Camp Glancey. Sam and Ella Werner, Bud's grandparents, also let the Boy Scouts use an area on Little Falls. They called it Camp Samella.

Father Adamz was knowledgeable about snakes. Once Homer sent him a nearly 7-foot rattlesnake by railway express. It was making so much noise that "I had to fix the cage just so-so" so the railway people would agree to take it. Father Adamz took the snake over to Camp Gailor-Maxon, which was in session at DuBose Conference Center. "He took pictures of the kids with the snake around their necks and everything. He thought I had defanged it, but I hadn't. Luckily, it didn't bite any of them!"

Back then people walked everywhere. Once Homer went to Bryant's Cove with Father Adamz to a Baptist foot washing. Father Adamz had his feet washed — Homer didn't. "At the end of the line, after a few foot washings, the water did look a little tough!"

Father Adamz accepted the call to Otey Parish in Sewanee in 1941.¹ When his health began to fail in 1947, he retired and moved back to Tracy City where he and his wife lived in a house built for them by the Werner family.

The Church of the Good Shepherd

Homer used to go on foot out to Foster Falls, about 6 to 7 miles, for church services. There were quite a few Episcopalians at Foster Falls, mainly the Jess Harris family. Jess was "born and raised in the Gizzard. He was a moonshiner to start with, but he converted." Homer used to stay with the Harrises, and during Christmas, members of Christ Church in Tracy City would gather up gifts for the children in the Foster Falls area. Homer would take the gifts out there and play Santa Claus. He would wear "an old beat-up Santa Claus suit, and the kids would be scared to death. One time, a little girl was fooling with my clothing. She turned and said, 'I don't know who Santa Claus is, but he's got Homer Kunz's hunting shirt on!'"

A seminarian named John Sively got the Weyerhaeuser Company, with whom he had connections, to donate the wood for a church that Homer built at cost at Foster Falls. The Harris family formed most of the congregation. It was a "pretty

little church," called the Church of the Good Shepherd. It had a scissors truss vaulted ceiling, and over the altar there was a picture window through which you could see out into the woods. Unfortunately the church has since burned. A photograph of its exterior hangs in the Christ Church parish house.

Further Adventures and Friends

Homer and Bishop Juhan of Sewanee were good friends. They hunted a lot together, and Homer did a good deal of work for him, on his house as well as the inside of the Delta Tau Delta house, Bishop Juhan's fraternity. Homer always called him Bishop Juhan, although he'd always call up and say, "Homer, this is Frank!"

One day, the bishop phoned to say, "Come down in the morning. We're going to make history." It was the Fourth of July, and the 100th anniversary of the founding of the University. Homer and William Ray Turner posed for photographs, pretending to begin surveying for the expansion of All Saints' Chapel. Although they were not quite ready to start work in earnest, they did mark the day with a flourish of activity. "It was just a show-off thing."

Homer often went caving with John and "Doc Henry" Kirby-Smith. He never caved with Ned McCrady, but he knew him well. One time, Homer was in a wide, low cave that had a river running right through the middle. Looking for a place where he could stand up straight, he found a hole in the ceiling. He straightened up into the hole and there was Ned McCrady's name, written with the smut from a carbide lantern!

Dr. McCrady once discovered the remains of a saber-toothed tiger in a cave in this area. But not all finds are so exciting: Homer's son John once eagerly took an artifact to Dr. McCrady, thinking it was possibly a Spanish spearhead from the days of deSoto. After studying it, he decided it was most probably an ornament from a graveyard fence. Oh, well!

There are lots more stories where these come from, stories worth going after. One messy mishap that might be worth following up on involved Homer's trying to butcher a cow using Ray Ingram's chainsaw. They cut it all the way down the middle. "That was gruesome," and "It kind of gummed up the works," are all he'd say about that one!

I will end this with one last good story. Homer has always enjoyed woodworking, and sons John and Fritz have inherited this aptitude. Homer made practically every piece of furniture they have in the house, including comfortable chairs and beautiful tables, all waxed to a warm sheen. Most of this furniture is from the wood of a single cherry tree. Homer explains, "Once I found myself behind a truck hauling a huge black cherry that had been felled in Bell's Cove. I followed

the truck all the way to the mill, got out and bought the wood on the spot. 'I want it all!' I told him." And he got it.

—Mary Priestley

Special thanks to Ethel King, John Kunz's sister-in-law, who arranged this interview.

¹From *A Brief History of Otey Parish 1870-1965*, "Dr. Alexander Guerry, entering the vice-chancellorship in 1938, sought out the spectacularly successful Father Alphonso Constantine Adamz in 1941, who had brought such a renaissance to the little church in Tracy City. ... Father Adamz profoundly influenced the lives of the young people of the community through scouts, camping, and exploring."



Aubrey King; Homer Kunz, Paul Thomas, James Myers and E. H. Barker

Jake Stampfli

Homer Kunz





Homer Kunz at a still in the Gruetli-Laager area