Where Is Home?

I often experience a sense of being with my ancestors when I am at my farm in Illinois. There, at Dayton, about 80 miles southwest of Chicago, my family settled in the late fall of 1829. My great-great-grandfather, John Green, the son of a Revolutionary War veteran and himself a contractor who helped build the Erie Canal, rode west from Ohio in the summer of 1829 in search of a site suitable for milling. After traversing central Illinois, southeastern Wisconsin, and southwestern Michigan, he found what he was looking for on the Fox River, two miles upstream from its confluence with the Illinois River at Ottawa. Family lore has it that he rejected Chicago, believing it "too low and swampy" ever to amount to much!

Returning to Ohio, Green described the site he had purchased and moved his family, the Greens and the Trumbos, to Illinois in the late fall of 1829. (A distant relation of mine was screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, one of the Hollywood Ten blacklisted in 1947 after they refused to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee regarding communist activities in Hollywood.) This was not the optimal time to travel, in poor weather over even poorer roads. Nearing their destination late in December, they decided to travel through the night, despite a freezing rain. Shortly after dawn the next morning, they reached Dayton. John Green's mother was unable to rise from the open wagon in which she had ridden during the night—her frozen clothes were fixed solidly to the wagon!

In their new home, the Greens and Trumbos build temporary shelters and a small grist mill. With wheat grown by one of their few neighbors, the Greens milled on July 4, 1830, the first flour ever produced in Illinois. In 1832, the two families fled to the stockade at nearby Ottawa during the Black Hawk War. The fort was under the command of a young man newly arrived in Illinois, Abraham Lincoln, who had volunteered for militia service and became a captain. (Lincoln is associated with Ottawa for another reason as well: The first Lincoln-Douglas debate in the 1858 Senate campaign was held there. Perhaps members of the Green and Trumbo families heard the debate.) The short but decisive Black Hawk War was named for the Sauk Indian leader Black Hawk, who defied the government and crossed back into Illinois from Iowa, where the Sauks and Fox tribes had been driven in 1831. An Indian band attacked a settlement near Dayton, killing about 20 settlers and kidnapping two young white girls, who eventually wound up in the care of a couple who adopted them. They remained with the Indians for several years but ultimately returned to the white culture.

The marauding Sauk and Fox bands massacred a number of settlers, but they were massacred in far greater numbers when government troops retaliated. By 1837, almost all the Indians of Illinois (and eastern Iowa) had moved to the far west in an attempt to escape the persecution of whites. A few Indians, however, remained, including Shabana, another Indian leader who had opposed Black Hawk and actually protected some whites. My Aunt Maunie, who was born in 1866, told how the Green and Trumbo children were terrified every time the friendly but fiercesome-looking (to them) Shabana appeared. According to these tales, he delighted in throwing his tomahawk into a large oak tree that once lived in the backyard. Today, Shabana is remembered with a state park near Ottawa named in his honor.

The Greens and Trumbos have told the story of the Black Hawk War for more than a century and a half. My father wrote a short fictionalized account of the two girls' experience, "The Peony," for a college course in 1938 (he received an A-).

After the discoverey of gold in California in 1848, sparking the California Gold Rush,

John Green led three different expeditions to the gold fields. He and the others in his first party panned for gold but found only enough to produce a plain gold ring. My grandmother showed me the ring a few years before she died in 1968. Its whereabouts today is unknown. My Aunt Grace, now 93, denies ever hearing anything about such a ring, although my two cousins, Candace and Sally, say they heard about it from Grace's younger sister, Aunt Babe, who died in 1997.

The two later expeditions to California in the early 1850s were business ventures, rather than for prospecting. They made the first two trips overland, but on the third the Greens went down the Mississippi River with a herd of horses they hoped to sell in the gold fields. From New Orleans, they traveled by boat to Mexico, which they attempted to cross to the Pacific, thence on to California by boat. But they encountered thieves and experienced other calamities along the way, and the trip was a financial disaster.

The mill, however, was a success, and in the 1850s the Greens expanded it to be a woolen mill as well as a grist (and sometimes saw) mill. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, the price of wool soared because cotton was no longer readily available. The Greens obtained government contracts to produce woolen blankets, clothing, and other goods needed by the army for Union soldiers. The mill was so busy that the Greens expanded it significantly. When the war ended in 1865, the price of wool dropped precipitously, and the Greens found themselves deeply in debt from the cost of the mill expansion.

Still, the mill might eventually have found its way back to profitability, but for the Great Chicago Fire that began October 8, 1871. To reduce the cost of raw material, the Greens had purchased a large quantity of wool while prices were low and stored it in a warehouse in Chicago. The fire destroyed both the warehouse and its store of uninsured wool, and with it the future of the Green mill at Dayton. They were forced to sell the mill to pay their crushing debt (the price they received covered only a portion, but they eventually repaid the entire amount). The mill struggled along for a few years, then burned and was never rebuilt. In 1921, stones from the old ruined mill were used in the construction of a dam across the Fox River to power a hydroelectric plant. Today, there is no trace of the mill, but the dam and the power plant are still there and still in use. I have a plain white wool blanket that was produced at the mill. It is now yellow with age after nearly a century and a half.

My great-grandfather, Isaac Green, one of John Green's nine children, farmed until he suddenly went blind in midlife. His son, Lyle Green, born in 1868, farmed after that until he passed title to the farm to my grandfather in the mid-1920s. Lyle was a longtime bachelor until he married a pretty and much younger woman named Eva Duffield in 1906. They were married for nearly 20 years when one day Lyle came home unexpectedly to find his wife with another man. In great consternation, Lyle went that very evening to the home of my grandfather, Ralph Green, an Ottawa attorney, and together they transferred the title to the farm so there would be no possibility the land would pass out of the family in the ensuing divorce proceeding between Lyle and Eva. This story too became part of my family's lore, though it was the part that was only told in whispers and only when you were old enough to hear it.

The youngest of Isaac's three children, Ralph Green was born in 1870. He went to work as a railroad postal clerk rather than attend high school, but after several years he studied with the local high-school principal and received his diploma, then read law with an attorney in Ottawa until he was able to pass the bar, about 1900. (Nowadays, aspiring lawyers go to law school—but the rules still permit one to learn the law from a qualified attorney, a time-honored process called

"reading the law.") He became a successful attorney in Ottawa and married Ruth Haight in 1905. My Aunt Grace was born in 1908, my Aunt Babe in 1911, my father, Kenneth, in 1918. In those days, babies were often called "Babe," a nickname the child carried until the birth of the next infant. Aunt Babe (her real name was Ruth) was seven when my father was born, and by then the name had stuck. Besides, in those days it was thought somewhat unmanly for a male child to be called "Babe" (Babe Ruth notwithstanding).

After the farm passed to him in 1925, Ralph moved his family from Ottawa into the house Lyle and Eva had built in Dayton in 1923 (the same house where Lyle discovered Eva's infidelity). Lyle continued to manage the farm until his death in 1935. Ralph was no farmer, though he fancied himself one, of the gentleman-farmer variety. Sometime during World War II, my grandmother gave her return address on letters as "Green Acres, Dayton." On a fertile hillside across the Fox from the main portion of the farm, Ralph planted an orchard. Though I never saw it, it evidently was successful (in large measure no doubt because of Lyle's experience as a farmer), since lifelong villagers still recall it.

My Uncle Charles Clifford took over the farm when he married my Aunt Grace in 1938. Born in 1905, Charles came from a long line of farmers. His family emigrated to America from Alsace in France (or was it part of Germany then?), not very far from where my father was killed during World War II. Charles tilled the fields, milked the dairy cows, harvested the crops, managed the accounts. When he began farming, 80 acres was the maximum amount of land one man could expect to farm alone without much help. During his career, tractors replaced horses and chemicals replaced manure, and that figure rose to about 160 acres. Charles has been retired from farming for three decades, and now the man who farms our property farms some 2,500 acres altogether.

Farming methods also changed significantly during Charles's career. Whereas he plowed in the spring, wrestled with weeds during the summer, and tilled again in the fall after the harvest, today farmers throughout the Midwest rotate fields year to year between corn and soybeans. After harvesting a corn crop, they leave the stubble in the fields; the next spring they come along with machinery that drills holes in the stubble and plants soybeans in the holes. This greatly reduces not only the toil of farming but also the effects of soil erosion. In addition, soybeans return nitrogen to the ground, replenishing the soil.

My father, Kenneth Green, went off to the University of Illinois in 1936. As valedictorian of his high-school class, he received two scholarships, though he needed only one. He gave the second to the salutatorian, which enabled her to attend college. Both scholarships were for $350 a year. At Champaign, my father pursued journalism (I did not know this until many years later, years after I was a journalist myself) for awhile, but at some point he changed his mind in favor of law and graduated from the University of Illinois College of Law in June 1941.

With Europe and Asia already at war, and the prospect that the United States soon would be, with the near certainty that new law graduates would soon be called to military service, the legal profession in almost every state moved up the date of bar exams from late November or December to August or September. Like thousands of others all over the country, my father took off his cap and gown as soon as the graduation ceremony was over and began studying for the bar. He took the Illinois bar exam in August and a few weeks later received the news that he had passed. In the same day's mail came his orders to report for active duty in the army.

As a young second lieutenant in the cavalry, he went first to Camp Chafee in Arkansas, the to Ft. Knox in Kentucky for extensive training in armor, then—in August 1942—to Camp

Campbell as a cadre officer for the newly organized 12th Armored Division. Camp Campbell (today Ft. Campbell, home of the 101st Airborne Division) is on a vast tract of land that straddles the rolling hills of western Kentucky and Tennessee.

Soon after graduation from Russellville (Kentucky) High School in May 1942, accompanied by several of her classmates, my mother, Jean Huff, got a job as a civilian clerk in the rail transportation office on the base. She grew up during the Great Depression of the 1930s and the coming of war for her meant the possibility of a good-paying job. As a teenager, it also must have meant the possibility of adventure, the opportunity to get away from the supervision of her parents, Margaret Eileen and Briggs Huff.

Only a few weeks after she began working at Camp Campbell, and soon after my father arrived on the base, First Lieutenant (soon Captain) Kenneth Green came to the rail transportation office to check on the expected arrival of equipment for his new unit—and there they met. He found cause to drop by often to check on one thing or another, and though he was older than she by six years, they soon began dating.

The 12th Armored Division participated in the Tennessee Maneuvers in the late spring of 1943, a massive military exercise over a period of several weeks that showed nearly all the units involved needed much more training before they would be ready to send into combat. Training intensified during the summer and fall, and in early November the 12th received word that it was transferring to Camp Barkeley near Abilene, Texas.

Despite frequent protracted absences from one another because of the army's intensive training schedule, Ken and Jean managed to fall in love and get married. The wedding was planned for late December 1944, just before Christmas. Ken was already in Texas, but he had arranged a leave. They would marry at the Presbyterian church in Campbellsville, drive to Illinois for Christmas so the Greens could meet their new daughter-in-law, then go on a honeymoon in Mexico before proceeding to Abilene for Captain Green to rejoin his outfit. On December 20, Ken arrived for his wedding, scheduled the next day—and then things got off track. Within hours, he was at the base hospital for an emergency appendectomy, the church wedding was off, and in its place, a small bedside ceremony in the hospital.

A day or so later, the newlyweds took the train to Illinois and there my mother spent her first Christmas away from home, in the company of people she had never met. One was Aunt Harrie, who was always my father's favorite relative. She is still alive—103 years old, in excellent health for a woman 20 years younger than she actually is, lively and alert. It was also there in Dayton that my parents at last consummated their union—and once again things got off track, when someone walked in on them, a source of deep embarrassment to this very day for my mother.

They canceled their plans to honeymoon in Mexico because of the failing health of Ralph Green. He had been ill with severe respiratory problems for several years; now, he was known to have lung cancer. I have often wondered about the source of my grandfather's disease. He never smoked in his life, nor was cancer a family illness. Perhaps he contracted lung cancer from casual contact during his railroading years with the radium-rich sands quarried about 20 miles away. For many years, they were transported to Ottawa by rail as raw material for a plant that painted watch dials with radium paint. Ralph died in late February 1944.

By then, or soon after, the newlyweds knew they would be parents in September. (Did that relative who walked in unexpectedly on my parents witness my actual conception?) In late August, the 12th received orders to ship out by rail on the first of September for New York, and

there board ships for the crossing to England. As the S3, or operations, officer for the division's 43rd Tank Battalion, my father was among the first to leave. My mother said she never felt so lonely as on that early morning when she said goodbye to him. Within a few days, the entire division was gone, and so too most of the friends she had met, the wives of other officers. She was late in her pregnancy, and the doctor advised her not to travel. In any event, by then it was hard to get on any train, which were filled almost entirely with soldiers and others on official war business. My grandmother—I called her "Mamma"—was unable to get a train to Abilene until a few days before I was born on September 27, 1944. My mother cabled my father about my birth and followed with letters, but still he did not learn of my arrival until the second week of October, after the 12th Armored Division had reached England.

The division billeted at the English army's Tidworth Barracks on the Salisbury Plain until late November, when they crossed the English Channel and landed at Cherbourg. My father was promoted to major on Thanksgiving Day. The 12th moved east out of Cherbourg, making a quick run across France, finally taking up position near Strasbourg in mid-December, on the eve of the Battle of the Bulge. That great battle, a counteroffensive by the Germans, was fought in the Ardennes to the north and northwest. After the tide of battle had turned first in their favor, then against them, the Germans launched Operation Nordwind in mid-January. Their objective was to put pressure on Strasbourg, precious to the French as the heart of Alsace and neighboring Lorraine. They expected the French to pull their units from the allied forces along the Ardennes, thereby allowing the Germans to push though weakened lines.

The strategy failed, but one of the key battles of the little-known Operation Nordwind was fought at Herrlisheim, a small Alsatian farming community on the western flats of the Rhine River, about 20 miles north and a little east of Strasbourg. There on January 16 and 17, 1945, the 12th Armored Division and elements of two other armored divisions fought what initially was believed to be remnants of a single Panzer division. But the 7th Army's intelligence was wrong. In truth, the opposing force amounted to more than two full armored divisions—and not inexperienced troops hastily assembled, as thought, but seasoned forces. The 12th suffered heavy losses on the 16th, even heavier losses the next day. The 43rd Tank Battalion—my dad's unit—was virtually wiped out. The battalion commander was seriously wounded and taken prisoner, the operations officer (my father) killed. Two of the company commanders were killed, the other two wounded and captured. Casualties among the enlisted men in individual units of the 43rd mounted to 50, 60, even 70 percent. The Germans took many prisoners, many of whom they treated harshly. After being liberated, one prisoner of war from 12th Armored Division climbed up on a tank and began to machine-gun his German captors.

After the battle at Herrlisheim, known among survivors simply as "Bloody Herrlisheim," the 12th fought across central Germany into Bavaria, ending the war in northern Austria. The 12th was a "liberating division," one of the American and English armored forces that liberated concentration camps. Among those liberated by the 12th was the one at Landsberg, a feeder for Dachau, established in 1933 as the first camp. Just hours before the 12th arrived, the SS guards herded some 3,000 prisoners into a large wooden barn and set it afire. They machine-gunned those who clawed their way out. Remarkably, a few hundred actually survived to greet advance units of the 12th Armored Division.

There is no trace today of the camp at Landsberg. It was near the prison where Hitler served his sentence after the failed Munich *putsch* in 1923. Inside the prison (still in use), soldiers of the 12th Armored Division discovered the original manuscript of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Today,

it is in the Patton Armored Museum at Ft. Knox, Kentucky.

In September 1998, my son, Jesse, and I visited my Aunt Grace and Uncle Charles at their home on the farm in Dayton. Years before, Charles had added a wooden deck to the house. The lumberyard didn't have as many 2x6s for the 18-foot-long joists as he needed, and, rather than wait for a special order, he decided to space the joists 24 inches apart, considerably wider than the usual 16 inches. Over time, the deck became springy, like you were walking on a mattress. On several occasions, I suggested driving down from Minnesota to fix the problem, but Charles always said no. Finally, in May 1998, he agreed.

Jesse and I arrived on a warm evening—to find that Charles, then 93 years old, had already begun taking up the decking. He had sorted the good boards from those needing to be replaced and had pulled out the nails from the reusable boards. The new decking and the requisite number of new 2x6 joists were on hand. Jesse and I finished pulling up the old deck boards, and the next morning we cut and laid out the new joists, then began nailing the decking in place. Two 2x4s, each eight feet long, per course, three nails every two feet, 15 nails per board, 30 per course, all of it on hands and knees. We soon realized this was hard work. Jesse, an inexperienced carpenter, gripped the hammer midway up the handle, requiring many strokes and causing numerous nails to bend. I, more experienced, gripped my hammer at the end of the handle, took fewer swings. Charles, most experienced of all—but 93 years old, after all—took only three swings per nail.

Jesse and I did most of the work, and I watched over Charles when he pitched in to take his share of the swings. He had had a stroke a few years before and as a result tended to lose his balance. I watched carefully, occasionally catching him as he began to topple to one side. We finished late in the afternoon. By then, every muscle in my arms and legs was screaming, "Enough! Enough!" Jesse was the same. The next day, on the way home, we were both in agony every time we stopped and got out of the car.

I will never forget that warm September day that we rebuilt Charles's deck. Dappled sunlight filtered down on us through the leaves of that massive old sugar maple, now gone, that stood just a few feet from the edge of the deck. Jesse, me, Charles—three generations of men working together to complete a known task. Generations of my family have done that, and beside me I saw my father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather, and others. Inside, Grace was preparing my favorite meal, roast beef with potatoes, carrots, and gravy, just as generations of women in my family have done before her.

Like my parents' wedding plans, my story seems to have gone astray. I sat down to write one thing, and another emerged. I intended to say that I experience being with my ancestors at my farm in Illinois—but home is somewhere else. I wanted to say that I feel closest to "home" in the woods or where I grew up in Kentucky or where I live now in Minnesota. I wanted to say that "closest" is not the same as "home," that because the orphan archetype is so strong within me no place really seems like home. I wanted to suggest that Americans haven't quite yet landed because we all feel like orphans in some fundamental way. Having left home, we wander in vain searching for a new one.

That's what I wanted to say. But the story took a different track. That September day in Dayton, I felt like I was where I should be. Perhaps that's home, or maybe home is somewhere else. But that day at least, I was home.