

A Touch of Puck—in Detroit

by Richard Marks

Really, the barn came before the horse—and even before The House.

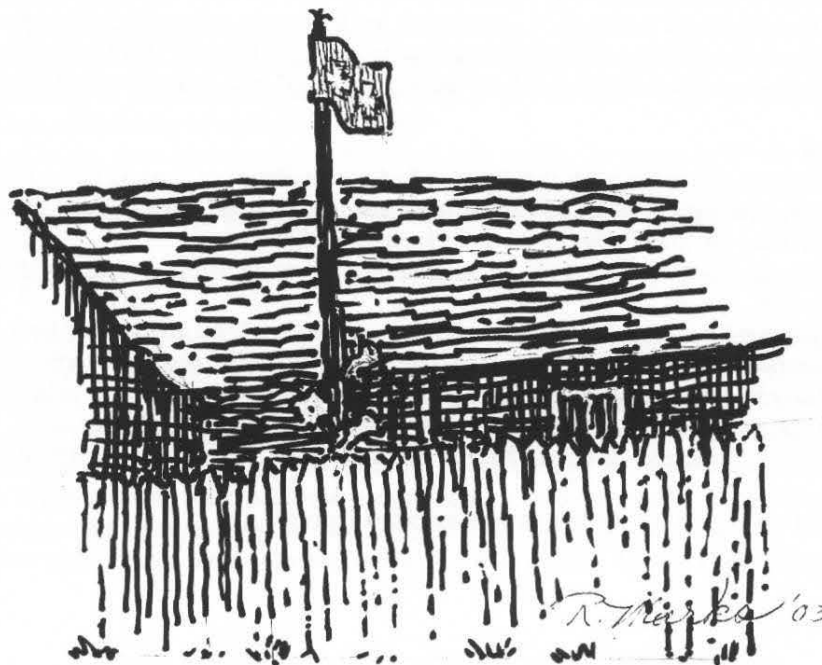
It was built by my Grandpa August Bolda and the other Kashubes from his home area in the old country who were transplanted on the next block and the block after that by an invisible hand. . . eight of them from around Puck, Poland. They were fishermen and farmers with tiny plots. Their original plan was to go to Chicago where there were a few Kaszubian migrants. Around Buffalo, New York, they met a man who was going to Detroit and he suggested it was a better choice since jobs were more plentiful and sometimes even paid more.

When they arrived in Detroit they were hired on the recommendation of the Priest at Saint Albertus Church who was trying to get a mission church going. So, they dug with a pick axe for the princely sum of three dollars a week, ten hours a day, six days a week.

Wages were better by the time Grampa arrived with his family. Kashubes and Galicians and Poles from all over the Old Country dominated Detroit's East Side.

The original eight first built a wooden structure, tiny and flimsy--built Amerikanski, not like the sturdy Kashubian barns. It was not built on a foundation of stones and not bolted together like their cottages at home. Of course, it blew over in a severe windstorm.

So, when Grampa and his buddies got to building our barn it was as though it was going up near Puck, or Wejherowo, or on any farm in Kashubia. It was where they would all live until The House was built. The House was made from a Sears' plan, but one could add extras like the stained glass window and the walnut floor. (My family said, "So what if it was just like next door. It's a lot nicer inside.") And it was big enough for all these people. And Augusta was not paying any more rent.



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So they put in a second window in the barn, about half the size of the regular window, four small panes. They also put on a thatched roof, but by the time I came along it had been replaced with a shingled roof. It was of rough sawn timbers. The bathroom was in The House.

Since we were on the corner lot, the barn opened to the alleyway so one could move large items in and out easily. A door on the side made it possible to enter from the back yard, but that door came later, as did a loft.

Can you imagine what a loft means to a kid? Especially a boy? My family would stand in the middle of that barn and call and call, and listen, but the loft which by the 'forties was overloaded would only creak in the wind. And, I would practice being quiet, pretending they were the Indians and I was an Army scout. There was a ladder up to the loft and I had dragged a bunch of big things to the front which made a good cover for me. It wasn't that I had done anything especially wrong; I think I did it only to see if I could.

Of course I had an alibi ready when they asked where I was. "At Joey's". I was always "at Joey's". Luckily I had five friends named Joey, Saint Joseph parish being really big with the Polish and Italian families on the East Side. I even had a fifth and fictitious Joey, German Joey, just in case they didn't get tired after asking through the first four. "Uncle John, I'm going to be at German Joey's playing Ping Pong." They were so used to Joeys that nobody asked me what Joey, what last name. Being fictitious had advantages. Michigan Bell wouldn't hook up a phone, and he lived on that short little street (or rather I put him on it), that street with the small dirty houses, not a place Mom wanted to go looking for me. And Ping Pong was safe. Pool could get you in trouble. That meant you were on the road to smoking and Lutheranism and in about two weeks directly at the gates of Hell. (I guess there is more than one gate.)

Just like in Kaszubia, when they built they used every inch of the property line, and maybe even a few inches extra. The city complained for years. They even got an inspector who was Polish. The men talked Kashub to him. What kind of a language is that? Not Polish, not any kind of Polish they ever heard. They would get him in between them and talk real loud. He gave up.

Then they sent a German over with a tin of snuff in his pocket. They went over to the beer garden. And they gave him some of their Goikes Genuine Kashub snuff at the beer garden. When he came back, they showed him how it was on a foundation of stones, just like in the old country. He said that surely wasn't the city code, but built way back when. And, it had been there all these years. He was sure that it was O.K.

That barn made me extra special with my friends. It looked spooky and was not painted white like the garages. It had a small door and just one light bulb. And the loft! Almost all of the wall on the alley side was a door. It was on hinges and swung out about half way into the alleyway. (Only used when big things had to go in or out. The cars were parked on the street. "It won't hurt 'em.") Grampa never learned to drive so there were always parking places on the street. Hardly any of the really old country men drove. My Aunt Elenore, the youngest daughter in Mom's family, was the first woman to drive.

Mr. Wroblewski across the street modeled his design after Gramp's, but since he had a horse and a cart for hauling vegetables, it was a lot bigger. He had an artist, the one that did the backgrounds at the National Burlesque house, paint a triangle at the middle of the rafters—Kashub style with the 'Eye of God' looking down. (God had brown eyes.) Mr. Wroblewski and his friends would drink on the other side of his barn—out of sight of the Missus in the kitchen, and with God high up in the rafters.

Their barn, their refuge; my barn with its loft, my refuge. From there to here, the same.