

SWOPE HOME
by Curt France

What the France's remember about living at the Swope home where Granddad and Grandma lived.

This came about because of a fire that destroyed the France home on Whetstone Road in McCutchanville.

One February night in 1944, Elnora France was across the valley back of our house up a hill to Petersburg Road planning a Valentine's party with Alto Paterson (a sister-in-law). When Elnora was on her way home through the valley over the fence, up the hill, she saw that the house was on fire.

Jean, the second oldest child, was up reading and smelled smoke, ran to the back of the house and saw the fire. She immediately got her brothers and sister (Lawrence, Ray, Curt (Bud) and Lois) out of the house and called Uncle Ralph Swope. Jim was away in World War II. Evelyn was in nurses training living in Evansville. Jean gave four long rings on the crank telephone, which meant emergency and everyone would answer. At that time, there was no fire department in McCutchanville and the well went dry. There was no electric pump, just a pitcher pump and that was in the back of the house where the fire started. Uncle Ralph and all the other men got all the furniture out of the house except the new kitchen range that was too hot and in the back of the house. Lois can remember waking up sitting by the big leaning tulip poplar tree in the front yard. She thought it was really great because right beside her was Bud's wooden box full of his farm animals. She was never allowed to play with them so this was special. Later someone took her and Bud over to the Moffets to spend the night. The house burnt to the ground.

Elnora had an old tin can (like a coffee can) filled with Indian head pennies in the hall closet. After the fire had cooled off about a week later, all went back digging through the rubble looking for all of the pennies! But it was never found. Someone else must have found them first.

The next day was the decision day! What to do and where to go. No one was living at the old Swope home so that is why and where they went. Trucks hauled all the belongings down the long lane to the large old Swope home. It was a large house with a large kitchen in the back with a pantry, stairway to the back cellar, a pitcher pump and sink to the right of the back door. There was a large coal stove along one wall where the bread was baked and for heat on those cold days and nights. The coal pile was outside and had to be carried in by buckets. In the winter, the snow had to be swept off before bringing into the house. From the kitchen was a long hall with no light in it. Grandma used to hang her coats etc in there. At the end of the hall was a dresser and a pot, no bathroom. A store room was in the back at the end and a door to the bedroom. On the other side of the kitchen was the door leading into the large dining room and there was a large built-in cabinet along the wall. The upper shelves are where Grandma Swope kept her good dishes but the bottom under the shelf we could get in and hide. There was a trap door in the floor that led down to the front cellar with an outside door on the east. That is where the carbide gas generator was kept for lights before electricity. There was an outside door to the west and on this wall was the crank phone and a large window with a couch in front of it. Under the stairway was a large closet where the kids

could hide. From this room was the stairway to the upstairs.

From the dining room was the door to the bedroom and to both of the front rooms (as there were two front rooms). From the bedroom there was a door to the east outside porch and a deep well on the porch. The main outside door that was used was the one that came in through the bedroom. That door was never locked so if there was a knock on the door, someone would just yell, "Come in". Well, one winter evening, Lois was taking her weekly bath in the wash tub in the dining room (the only really warm room) behind a folding screen. There was a knock on the door and someone yelled, "Come In". Mr. Felker, a man from the church, walked in. He was quite a talker and he and Elnora talked forever it seemed to Lois. The bath water got cold and she just had to sit there quiet, afraid that he would hear her.

In the well, part way down, was a shelf where food was kept to keep cool (milk, eggs, etc). In the east living room as Evelyn remembers, was Alice's baby grand piano in the corner of that large room. The two large doors between the two living rooms pushed back into the wall, one each way. There was a fireplace or so-called grate and a large bay window on the west wall. The Christmas tree was always in this bay window. The year Jim France was in the war, the tree was left up all summer until he came home that fall. There were double large windows in both of the front rooms looking to the South. It was very cold in that old house. The only heat was the cook range in the kitchen and a warm morning stove in the dining room.

Often the pump in the corner of the kitchen froze overnight. The bedroom downstairs wasn't as cold as the ones upstairs so on really cold nights, Elnora would heat a brick or two on the stove in the dining room, wrap it in a towel and put them in the bed. The bed would be nice and warm when crawled into. When it snowed, the boys upstairs would wake with snow on the floor and blankets. There were two large rooms upstairs in the front of the house. The boys used the room on the East and Isabel's furniture was stored in the West room. There was another room up there in the back over the dining room where the girls slept. It was also cold but not quite as cold as the stairway door was sometimes left open. In the summer time, the boys would take a cot and sleep out on the large upstairs front porch

One night a tornado came through and damaged some P47s down at the airport and broke a window on the west side where Isabel's furniture was and that had to be fixed.

Evelyn remembers staying all night with Grandma and Grandpa Swope often with Marjorie and Jane McCutchan. She can remember that Granddad sat in his comfortable chair at the end of the dining room table with his pipe and read the paper. Grandma sat on the other side by the stairway. When Evelyn wanted to go uptown from Reitz High School, she would get off the bus at Franklin Street and walk up First Avenue. Then she would go to Granddad's office in the Court Building and ride home with him. But that was before we lived there. Granddad Swope lived in Evansville when we lived in the old house. It was said that he rode the clutch (kept his foot on the clutch).

There were lots of suppers with fried potatoes and stewed tomatoes. On Christmas, the oldest boys (Hugh, Bob, and Don Henry, Dwight and Bub Swope. and Harold McCutchan and adults ate first, then the cousins. The boys had to do dishes while the rest of them ate. After Grandma died and Grandpa still lived there, the M.Y.F. had a New Years party there. Elnora France went down and fixed oyster soup and chili then they played games.

When Evelyn graduated from nurses training in August 1945, she went to work at Deaconess Hospital and rode to and from work with Uncle Jack McCutchan. Sometimes she had to ride the Petersburg Bus which came out on Whetstone Road and get off at Uncle Ralph's store and walk down Petersburg Road, cutting down a path at the top of the long hill and coming out by Alice's house, then on down through Uncle Jack's pasture, passed the old barn to the house.

Granddad would often have 4th of July fireworks in the field in front of the house and always had peanuts in the hull.

The France's also moved the cows, chickens and ponies into the old barn and chicken house. There was no water at the barn so water either had to be carried from the house or let the cows go down to the pond. But in the wintertime, the pond froze over and in the summer it went dry. There was a large woods pasture for the cows and horses down a long lane past the pond

Uncle Jack had pigs and two big Percheron horses. Bob was black with some white and Ding, the bigger one, was gray. Bob was smart. Bing was not. In the spring and winter, the long lane from the road to the house would always get muddy with very deep ruts. Uncle Jack would often get stuck with his Model A Ford, so Ross would get Bob to pull the old Ford out of the ruts on his way back home.

The barn was very large with two large hay rooms with logs from floor way up to the roof. There was a silo on the west end from the cow manger. Horse stalls were all the way down the long entryway. There was a large swing from one of the large timbers that crossed the entryway. In the back was an old horse drawn sleigh and a wheat binder.

Ross McCutchan would bring Bob and Bing up and plow the garden and work it down. There was a large garden with grapes down the middle. The plow was so big that he could hardly get it upright to plow. There were many corn cob fights in that old barn and firecrackers were dropped from inside the top of the silo just to hear the extra loud bang. As of April, 1999, this silo still stands. Just look up the hill of Highway 57 and you can see it. Some of the Catalpa Trees are still there and the circle drive is there yet.

A P47 airplane from the airport ran into Uncle Jack's house while the France's were at the Swope home. It really nearly missed the house as one wing hit a tree on one side, the other wing hit the house and the rest of the plane went down the hill into a pig pen. The pilot was not hurt.

At the back of the house was the outhouse, down a long cinder path under a big catalpa tree. In the summer were those big catalpa worms. This house was a three holer and before the days of soft wipes, so a Sears Roebuck catalog was always on the seat to look at and enjoy.

Out the back door of the house was a large concrete slab and a summer kitchen with a smokehouse attached where meat was cured. There was a dinner bell on one corner of this porch and two cisterns on the other. There was a large brooder house with a wood shed on end just beyond the porch on the way to the large chicken house.

There was a two car garage just beyond the wood shed and beyond that was the hog pens. When we got there, everything was in bad condition The hog house was about gone, the wood shed roof leaked and the barn was a total disaster. But those large timbers in the barn were as solid as a rock.

Cows, ponies and chickens had to be fed and watered before breakfast and off to school. Instead of walking down the long lane, we would cut through behind Aunt Laura and Alice's house through the pasture and come out at the top of the hill to catch the bus that Bub Swope often drove.

Reminiscence by the France Family

Curt France, Author, 1999