

# John Clifford Frakes

A History

By Tim Frakes



My Grandfather, John Clifford Frakes,  
cir 1940s

### **Why I Write**

I never met my paternal grandfather, John Clifford Frakes (June 2, 1890 – April, 25, 1945), though two of my aunts, Mercedes and Ione, wrote about him in their fine personal memoirs. They detailed many delightful and important anecdotes about him, my grandmother and the extended family. They are valuable resources.

Still, I wanted more. For 43 years I have been making television documentaries and telling stories about people outside my own family. As my TV career winds down, I plan to spend more time with my family. That means I want to get to know my grandfather. Of course, that is impossible. So I turned to family and official sources, learning a great deal about him from government census, military draft, marriage, birth and death records.

Conversations with family included a recorded interview in the early 2000s with my aunts Ione Driggs and Mercedes

Bruss. I also enjoyed phone conversations with my 95 year old father, John Floyd Frakes, as well as my cousins, Bernie Driggs and Jack Bruss, and my brother, also John Clifford Frakes. All three are old enough to have memories of my grandparents.

Clippings from newspapers in Zanesville, Ohio, Chicago and Wisconsin also helped form a clearer picture. Regarding my grandfather's roots and early life, the *Zanesville Times Recorder* and the *Zanesville Signal* were really helpful. My grandfather's origin story was mostly a mystery prior to research. Small town newspapers in the late 19th and early 20th century reported national, state and local news but also served in the same way that social media does today, publishing trivial stories submitted by readers about family dinner parties and personal trips to visit relatives. From these sources we get a sense that my grandfather's family loved to gather together.

Here are two examples.

The March 18, 1913 *Zanesville Times Recorder* noted:  
*Mr. and Mrs. Walter Frakes of Caldwell street charmingly entertained at dinner for Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Frakes. A very pretty color scheme of pink and white was carried cut with seasonable flowers. Covers were laid for Mrs. Ella Frakes and children, Harley, Bradford, Harold and Bessie, Mr. and Mrs. John Frakes and the Misses Carsonetta, Evelyn and Hazel Frakes, Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Frakes and Mr. and Mrs. Walter Frakes.*<sup>1</sup>

The November  
11, 1919  
*Zanesville  
Times Recorder*  
also noted:  
*At Frakes  
Home.  
A surprise party  
was given by  
quite a number  
of boys and girls  
Thursday evening for Bradford Frakes to celebrate his 14th  
birthday. The evening was spent in games and a delightful  
luncheon was served.*<sup>2</sup>



The Children of Leroy Milton and Rachael Frakes  
Noble Frakes 1882 - 1934, Clyde Frakes 1884 - 1947, Walter Frakes 1886 - 1932,  
(Rear, 2nd from Right) John C. Frakes 1890 - 1945 Clarence R. (Tom) Frakes 1892 - 1952, Harley Frakes 1895 - 1980  
Bradford Frakes 1897 - ? (Center Rear) Bessie Frakes 1902 - 1951 (Center front) Harold Frakes 1908 - 1972.

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<sup>1</sup> March 18, 1913 *Zanesville Times Recorder*

<sup>2</sup> November 11, 1919 *Zanzeville Record*

John Clifford Frakes's story isn't marked by notable achievements. There is no documentation of elected positions, athletic trophies or acts of heroism. I possess no sample of his handwriting, nor anything he ever wrote. This begs the question: Is it worthwhile to write a biography about an ordinary person? What makes a person's life noteworthy? My grandfather survived in a world filled with dramatic social and economic upheaval and had a life that by all accounts was well-lived. He had brown eyes and brown hair with a medium build. He was a jack-of-all trades with an 8th grade education: farmer, industrial worker, carpenter, auto mechanic, plumber, landscaper, etc. He chewed tobacco and had a brass spittoon. He drank dime beer in local taverns, but apparently not to excess. He was also creative in finding ways to survive and provide for his family despite his disability. His children, grandchildren and great grandchildren are abundant. Some of them could be described as ordinary. Others are or were extraordinary.

When the United States began registering American men for the World War I draft, John was already a widower with three children. So unlike two of his brothers, he never served in the military. John Clifford Frakes suffered unimaginable loss in the premature death of his first wife and later, the death of a teenage daughter from stomach cancer. He made mistakes and did his best to correct them. He never gave up and worked hard for his family right up to the end of his

days. He loved others and was, in return, loved by them.  
And so I write.



Dogs used to pull coal out of mines in Muskingum County during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

## **From Farming and Mining to Industry**

John Clifford Frakes was born in Pleasant City, Ohio, the fourth of 9 children to Leroy Milton and Rachael (Rucker) Frakes.

His birth certificate form is filled out with an early typewriter, giving it a modern appearance. The family was living in Guernsey County and then Caldwell, Noble County, Ohio. His 28 year old father, Leroy Milton Frakes (1860–1912) was listed on his birth certificate as a contractor.<sup>3</sup> A decade earlier, according to the 1880 US Census, they were farm laborers in Noble County, Ohio.<sup>4</sup>

Our family has deep roots going back to Colonial America, Canada and Europe. Family legend claimed that the Frakes family was “Shanty Irish” from County Cork, Ireland. The

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<sup>3</sup> Ohio, County Births, 1841-2003

<sup>4</sup> 1880 US Census

implication being that they were poor because their ancestors were poor. Research shows family legend is wrong. We descend from minor nobility.

There is a Castle Freke in Cork that my family visited in 2016. We even climbed around its ruins. There was a branch of that clan who got land and title in Cork, but those are our cousins. Our direct ancestral line comes from Hinton St. Mary in Dorset. It's a tiny village situated in the Blackmore Vale, a picturesque, wide valley known for lush farmlands, historic villages, and literary connections (especially Thomas Hardy). It's 36 miles southwest of Stonehenge. John Clifford Frakes' ancestor, John Freake (1631 -1675) arrived in Boston, from Hinton St. Mary prior to the American Revolution. In Boston he married Elizabeth Clarke, in 1661.<sup>5</sup> From Boston their descendants moved to Western Pennsylvania where they homesteaded until their descendants made their way to southwest Ohio.

### **The Gilded Age**

In 1890 Ohio was an emerging agricultural and industrial juggernaut. It was the Gilded Age, a time of rapid industrial growth with big economic winners and many losers. New inventions and institutions taken for granted today were percolating. Edison's lightbulb and major league baseball are two examples.

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<sup>5</sup> Massachusetts, Town Clerk, Vital and Town Records, 1626-2001

*The Zanesville Daily Signal* reported that the Chicago Cubs were 15-14 on June 2, 1890. Zinsmeister and Linser, brewers of export and bottled lager beer advertised “manufactured artificial ice”. In the days before electricity the brewery needed fermenting beer kept cool in vaults underground and ice was needed in households for refrigeration.



Brothers Clarence (Tom) and Walter Frakes  
as farmers, Cir 1900

The 1890 United States Census declared the frontier closed that year, symbolizing the end of westward expansion in North America. The massacre at Wounded Knee in December emphasized the point. Zanesville, Ohio-born author Zane Grey (1872 -1939) would go on to define the “Western” literary genre with a series of popular novels romanticising the “Old West”. One title, *The Vanishing American*, is a fictional account of the Navajo people in the American southwest.

There are no records that show the Frakes family in Zanesville owning the land they worked. According to Ione and my father’s recollections, the children were put to work

in Eastern Ohio's drift mines, digging for coal with dogs hauling the ore out of tiny shafts in the hillside. My father, 95 year-old John Floyd Frakes, related this story of children and dogs in coal mines in his 8th grade middle school class. The teacher was incredulous and my father's response got him kicked out of class. I also found this story unlikely until I did some research. In coal mining, there are three types of underground mines: shaft, slope, and drift. Drift openings exploit coal seams where they crop out. In southeast Ohio, small "dog-hole" or family-operated drift mines were common.

The Ohio Mining Commission in 1871 reported "acceptance and promotion of children working in coal mines". The Muskingum County State Inspector of Mines said in 1884, "In mines on the east side of Zanesville, Muskingum County, 27 miners and 40 dogs were employed to mine and haul coal."

*It is a thing of rare occurrence to find a mine with coal of sufficient height to admit the entrance of a mule. For the purpose of hauling to and from the mines, a substitute is found in the canine race, and the burly mastiff supplies the motive power.<sup>6</sup>*

It appears that Ione and my dad were correct. Indeed, there are thousands of mapped surface and abandoned

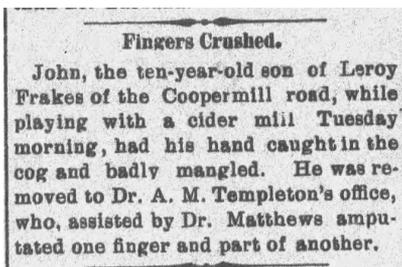
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<sup>6</sup> History of the Coal-Mining Industry in Ohio by Douglas L. Crowell

underground coal mines in and around Guernsey and Muskingum County's Ohio.<sup>7</sup>

What was reported for the record is a different matter. The 1890 census describes them as farm laborers. If the children were employed in wildcat coal mining, it is unlikely that their father Leroy would have mentioned it in any official record. An undated family photo shows brothers Tom (Clarence) and Walter with a hand scythe and hoe. Their slouch hats, kerchiefs, baggy shirts and trousers are remarkably similar to clothing worn by migrant laborers I've recorded over the years in places like Florida and Texas.

Farm labor by hand was on the way out in 1890. Technological advances such as Cyrus McCormick's "Reaper" expanded crop yields on one hand and reduced the need for farm labor on the other. More food for the world, less work, pay and opportunity for American farm laborers. My grandfather, his parents and siblings must have found life challenging.



August 8, 1899. The Zanesville Signal

For 10 year old John, life changed forever on August 8, 1899. The Zanesville Signal reported:  
*John, the ten year old son of Leroy Frakes of*

*the Coopermill road, while playing with a cider mill Tuesday morning, had his hand caught in the cog and badly mangled. He was removed to Dr. A. M. Templeton's office-who, assisted by Dr. Matthews, amputated one finger and part of another.*

*8*

From then on, John managed with only a thumb and index finger on the right hand. It's interesting to imagine how his friends and brothers responded to his disfigurement. It's difficult to play baseball with fingers missing on one hand. According to reminiscence from his children years later, it was a challenge he carried with stoicism and humor. His daughter Ione related a story from her childhood.

*I remember one time we were working in the yard and I was helping him plant tulip bulbs or something. And he took these two fingers (that's all he had on that end was those two fingers), and he is trying to pull the dirt out and the dirt keeps sliding back in the hole and I'm sitting there and looking at this and I'm choking because it looks so funny. And pretty soon he turned around and looked at me and he grinned. He says, "God dammit, get in there and get that dirt!"*

The actual account of what happened to his fingers was lost until research revealed the truth. Daughters Mercedes and Ione were only able to speculate.

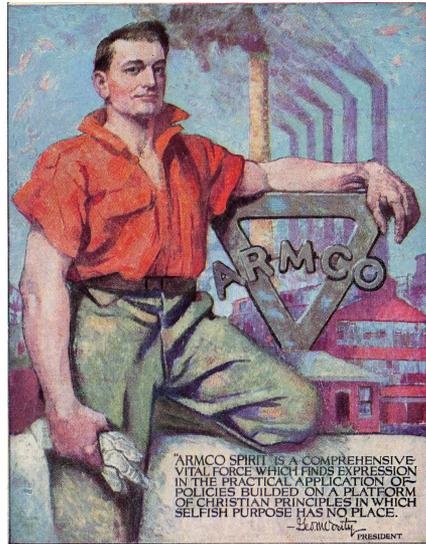
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<sup>8</sup> August 8, 1899. The Zanesville Signal

*They called Daddy 'Nubs' because his finger was missing, and on the thumb it was kind of a little nub. So they called him Nubs. Oh, there were so many stories. I asked Mom one time and Daddy said from the other room, 'Oh, I got it caught in a wine press! The Indians cut it!' Mom says he got it caught when he was stealing a chicken. Nobody knows. I never heard the true story. So I have no idea what happened to his fingers.*

### **Millwork**

By 1910, twenty year old John joined older brothers Walter and Harley in Zanesville, Ohio's steel industry. Younger brother Brad joined later. Zanesville was named after Ebenezer Zane (1747-1811), who



blazed Zane's Trace, a pioneer trail from Wheeling, West Virginia through present-day Ohio. Zanesville at the turn of the 20th century had a population of 23,583 and was known for pottery and textile manufacturing.

ARMCO, the American Rolling Mill Company purchased a sheet metal operation in Zanesville in 1905. The company's founder, George M. Verity, expanded his Middletown, Ohio operation. The company newsletter, *The ARMCO Bulletin*, describes a holistic work/life community that affirms families, faith and intense patriotism during the World War I era.

*The ARMCO spirit is a comprehensive vital force which finds expression in the practical application of policies builded on a platform of Christian principles in which selfish purpose has no place. - George M. Verity<sup>9</sup>*

Armco Park provided a swimming pool and picnic grounds for employees and there were company Christmas parties, a company band and an Armco Club that had club rooms for employees. By the standards of the day, ARMCO treated its employees well, but it was hot and dangerous work.

In 1979 singer songwriter James Taylor released "Millworker". Taylor later collaborated with Chicago author Studs Terkle on a Broadway musical based on Terkle's 1972 book, *Working*, which included an interview with an ARMCO employee in Chicago. The lyrics: *Millwork ain't easy, Millwork ain't hard, Millwork it ain't nothing but an awful boring job.*

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<sup>9</sup> The Armco Spirit, 1920 January 9 Cover

Not only could it be monotonous, it could also be brutal. Steelworkers in the early 20th century regularly worked 12 hour shifts, six or even seven days a week. With little regulatory oversight before the 1930s, plants ran long shifts to maximize output. Much of the steel industry including firms like ARMCO did not adopt an eight-hour day until around 1920, after World War I.



John Clifford Frakes with his first wife Emma Elizabeth Haessler and their infant daughter Carsonetta. Cir. 1912

## **Marriage and Family**

The disability and long hours didn't keep John from finding love. On June 18, 1911, 24 year-old John married 24 year-old

Emma Elizabeth Haessler. Six months after their wedding, John and Elizabeth had their first child, Carsonetta (Ruth) 1911–1981 followed by Russell, 1914–1994 and Mary, 1916–1935. Emma was a Zanesville girl, the second of four children. Her parents were immigrants from Baden-Württemberg, Germany.

Around 1913 the family moved to ARMCO's base of operations in Middletown, Ohio after ARMCO announced the construction of a new \$3 million rolling mill plant.<sup>10</sup> In

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<sup>10</sup> The Zanesville Signal, February 14, 1910

the early 20th century, industrial workers were subject to layoffs due to mechanical failures, holidays or drops in product demand. Layoffs meant no pay. There are numerous reports of the Zanesville plant laying off workers only to reopen a short time later. It is likely that John Frakes recognized an opportunity for his growing family in Middletown and took it.

### **Loss and Grief**

Whether it was complications from childbirth to daughter Mary, their third child, or something else, Emma Elizabeth Frakes died on May 29, 1916 leaving my grandfather with three children.

Her Zanesville obituary read:

*Mrs. Emma Haeseler Frakes, aged 29, the wife of John C. Frakes and daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Christopher Haessler of this city, died at Middletown, where she had lived for the past three years. Friday afternoon. The body was brought here (to Zanesville) Saturday evening and taken to the home of her parents at 1274 Grant Street. Funeral services will be conducted at the Pilgrim Evangelical Church by Rev. Mr. Fillbrandt at 2 o'clock Tuesday afternoon. Burial in Greenwood (Cemetery). Besides her husband and parents she is survived by three children: Mary, Christ (Russell) and Carsonetta, and by two sisters and three brothers. Mrs. Aubrey Harding, of Cumberland; Mrs. John Brauning,*

*Alfred, Herman and Carl Haessler of this city.*

With his hands full and undoubtedly grieving, John went back to family in Zanesville and rejoined the ARMCO plant on the assembly line as a shearman. Emma's parents in Zanesville helped out with the children while he worked.

The ARMCO plant in Zanesville was known as the "Linden Avenue Plant" and produced specialized steel products. A shearman cut iron, steel or stainless steel sheets and bars to specified sizes and shapes before further processing or fabrication. The job was a standard industrial role, essential for the war economy's high demand for steel during World War I. John's military draft card indicates that he was an Iron worker, single with three children.

### **Leaving Zanesville**

Sometime between Emma's death in 1916 and 1920, John Frakes placed his three children, Carsonetta, Russell and Mary in the care of family and headed to Chicago's south side, to work for Inland Steel on the Illinois/Indiana border. By 1917 capacity at Inland Steel reached one million tons per year. With the war raging in Europe, Inland completed construction of a second plant at Indiana Harbor.<sup>11</sup> The plant was located across the Indiana/Illinois state line. Once again, he worked as a shearman.

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<sup>11</sup> The Northwest Indiana Steel Heritage Project

Chicago in the prohibition era Roaring Twenties was the epicenter of what became known as the American Century. Chicago was blessed with water access through the Great Lakes and then the St. Lawrence Seaway, rail hubs connecting both sides of the continent and an exploding immigrant workforce. On top of that, the 1920's saw the early days of the Great Migration, as African Americans fled the Jim Crow south and flocked to cities like Chicago looking for and competing with others for work.

Carl Sandburg's 1914 poem Chicago, described the city this way:

*Stormy, busky, brawling,  
City of the Big Shoulders:  
They tell me you are wicked and  
I believe them, for I have seen your  
painted women under the gas lamps  
luring the farm boys.*

With alarming regularity, The Chicago Board of Trade in the 1920's created and then destroyed commodity trading millionaires in its new skyscraper at the corner of LaSalle and Jackson Streets. The city also battled demons in the form of organized crime, bootlegging, poverty, industrial abuse and racial tensions. The homicide rate in Chicago rose in the 1920s, from 10.5 to 14.6 per 100,000 by 1930.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Source: Newberry Library

With industries like the Chicago Stock Yards, the Pullman Rail Car operation and the steel industry, people flocked to Chicago looking for work. Home ownership for many of them was a dream. Boarding houses were common. Chicago's south side wraps eastward along Lake Michigan until it hits the Indiana State line. There, an expansive industrial region including Indiana Harbor, Gary and other cities offered jobs in the steel industry. As a shearman with experience at ARMCO, John Frakes was a prime candidate for employment. At the time, a young woman named Rose was helping out her two aunts in their boarding house business on Chicago's south side.

*Ione wrote, They lived in a very large boarding house. They were poor but the ladies knew how to cook and keep house, their rooms were filled with boarders; mostly men that had to live away from home. One of these men was my Dad, John Frakes, a shearman at the Inland Steel Company.*

### **Rose (Willette) Frakes**

Rose Mary Willette (1895-1972) was born in Calumette City Illinois, an industrial suburb on Chicago's far south side. The daughter of French Canadian immigrants, Rosie, (as she is listed on the 1900 US Census) was the oldest of 16 surviving children born to Joseph Francois Ouellet (Willette) and Marie Louise Diette. Joseph Francois was born in Saint-Louis-de-Kamouraska, Kamouraska, Quebec,



Rose Willette Russell around the time she met my grandfather.

Canada. He was a bricklayer with a thick mustache that my father said resembled that of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. Marie Louise Diette was born in Massachusetts.

My aunt Mercedes described her mother Rose this way. “She had a good face. Busty as all get out. Like Dolly Parton. No waist, no hips and all on top. Cute and smart.” Rose moved out of

her parents house at the age of 18 when she married a man by the name of Frank Russell from Harvey, Illinois, a nearby suburb. Little is known about Russell beyond the fact that he married Rose. Either he died or they were divorced by 1919 when John and Rose met at the Chicago boarding house.

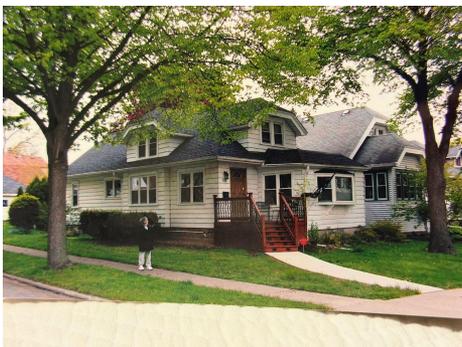
Sparks must have struck. On June 6, 1920, John Clifford Frakes and Rose Mary Russell gave birth to a daughter, Ione Marguerite Frakes. The 1930 US Census records that Ione was born in Canada. They may have gone to Canada for work. But they may also have gone there to deliver their child. Here we can only speculate, but as a previously married Roman Catholic marrying a non-Catholic, Rose

would have found it difficult to deliver a child out of wedlock on the heavily Catholic south side. Whatever the reason, they were back in Chicago on December 28, 1921 where John C. Frakes and Rose Russell, age 24, were married in a courthouse ceremony.<sup>13</sup>

By February 1921 John and Rose were stable enough to reunite the family.

According to Ione, John asked Rose,

“Do you want to raise my kids? Otherwise I will leave them with the grandparents (in Ohio). He gave her that choice. And she said, ‘I’ll take your kids. You can’t leave them behind.’ So she did. The grandparents (John’s in-laws) didn’t like it. But they were his, so that is what they did.” According to one family story, John’s in-laws (Emma Hasseler’s parents) didn’t approve of Rose. Possible explanations include her being a Roman Catholic, divorced or even the reality that they would lose their grandchildren. Something every grandparent can relate to.



Mercedes (Frakes) Bruss, the daughter of John and Rose Frakes in front of the home at 7232 W. Mt. Vernon Ave, West Allis, Wisconsin. Her parents built the home in the 1920s and then lost it during the Great Depression.

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<sup>13</sup> Source: Cook County Marriage Index Years 1914-1942

## **On Wisconsin**

In February, 1921 the growing family moved to the Blue Mound Heights neighborhood in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. John's brothers Harold, Harley, Clarence and Walter also moved there. The largest employer in the area was tractor manufacturer Allis Chalmers. There is no record of John Frakes ever working at Allis Chalmers, and my Father has no memory of him ever working there. Given his resume with ARMCO, it seems likely that he found work in a related operation. The 1930 census lists him as a shearman in the steel industry.<sup>14</sup> My cousin Bernie Driggs recalls stories of him having an automobile repair business. Rose, of course, was home raising a house full of children.

The mid to late 1920's were good years economically for John and Rose. By 1925 they had built their own home at 7232 W. Mt Vernon Ave., valued at \$7,000.00. They also had a radio! The home was a few blocks from the Wisconsin State Fairgrounds and less than two miles away from Walter Frakes. According to the West Allis Historical Society, "The 1920s as a whole were kind to West Allis. Prosperity, busy factories, and expansion of public improvements made it a good place in which to live and work."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> United States, Census, 1930 entry for John Frakes and Rose Frakes

<sup>15</sup> <https://westallishistory.org/history-of-west-allis-wisconsin/>

Mercedes and Ione pick up the story.

*He made a beautiful home. They built the whole thing from scratch. It was a tin house to start with, like a little shack. They built the house around it so that it had the best insulation in the world. Daddy said, leave it (the interior tin house) there. They partitioned it off. The house is still there. It looks today, exactly like it did back then. It was really Mum's.*

Between 1920 and 1930 Rose gave John five more children. Ione, Mercedes, twins Lloyd and Floyd (Floyd died in infancy) and in October, 1930 my father, John Floyd Frakes. Carsonetta, and Russell (Bus) also joined from Ohio.

Mercedes and Ione continue.

*He was working and we had plenty of money. We were doing great. According to most standards, we were kinda rich. Because when they finally got this house all together, I know mom ordered Austrian shades and we had beautiful chandeliers. But that's because daddy was working. He must have been making pretty good money. But then we went from that to nothing.*



Russell (Bus) Frakes with friends in Colorado.

### **Hard Times**

The Wall Street crash of 1929 became a reality in September when share prices on the New York Stock

Exchange collapsed. Thousands of individual investors were wiped out. Banks failed, businesses closed, and the economic fallout eventually triggered a worldwide great depression. West Allis, Wisconsin was no exception. “Daddy went to work one day and there was a big sign across the building that said closed, moved to Indiana Harbor” Ione related. “No one was informed.”

Faced with the loss of income and few employment prospects, John and Rose developed a plan to provide for the family. They would find renters for their home on Mt. Vernon Avenue. That would pay the mortgage. Then, the family would rent a small farm with a large house and barn west of Milwaukee. Given his early experience in a farming family and the help of his oldest son, 16 year old Russell (Bus), John reasoned that they could grow their own food and at least not starve.

The plan soon fell apart. “Of course he got somebody in there that lied and said they had money when they didn’t,” related Ione. “Month after month he went back to the renters and said, Hey, you’re not paying your rent. And they cried and they said, ‘Oh no, we didn’t have the money, but it’s in there now. You can call the bank.’ But Daddy, being trusting, said, ‘Well that’s okay.’ Anyway, we lost the house. We lost the whole house. And we only owed a thousand dollars. And the whole house was gone.”

By this time John's oldest son Russell was known to the family as "Bus".

The nickname stuck after Rose gave him a fashionable Buster Brown haircut.

Apparently the move to the farm was too much for Bus. The 16 year-old had already faced adversity in his young life, the loss of his mother (Emma Elizabeth Haessler) at the age of 2, living with his German speaking grandparents after his father left town in search of work, a new mother and a new life in faraway Wisconsin.



A horse sculpture given to my dad by his father, John Clifford Frakes in 1944. The memento is one of the few relics that survived from my dad's childhood.

During the Great Depression many young people left home seeking jobs, adventure, and a better life. Riding the rails offered youth like Bus a way to escape dire situations. So one day Bus was gone, riding the rails out to Colorado, where he lived and worked in various mining communities like Leadville, Cripple Creek and Salida.

Many years later, Bus came to visit our family when we lived in Lakewood, Colorado. I must have been 10 or 11 years old at the time. My mother and I drove him up into the mountains to revisit one of the mining towns where he lived

and worked, possibly Cripple Creek. More than a trip down memory lane, Bus wanted to repay a debt. Literally. I remember walking into a bar and an elderly gentleman rising to his feet and shouting “Red!” (Bus also went by the nickname “Red”). The two warmly embraced and began a long conversation. Apparently Bus skipped town and failed to pay the rent. He now returned, decades later, to make good. All was right with the world.

Back at home, the absence of a healthy 16 year-old farm hand was another crushing loss. Subsistence farming was hard labor then. I know this because I have filmed subsistence farmers, typically women, in places like Tanzania, Uganda, Cuba and elsewhere. My father, John Floyd Frakes, who was less than 5 years old at the time, relates a story about his dad’s efforts to plow a field with a horse, a child and one good hand.

*Daddy was plowing with a horse and it was difficult for him because he couldn't grip the plow handles properly due to his lack of fingers. I was still very young. As a way to have me help, he attached a wooden yard stick to the horse's bridle. I was in front of the horse and he was behind. My job was to keep the plow furrow in a straight line using the yardstick as a guide.*

*Of course, being a child, my mind wandered until jolted back to the present by the sound of dads cursing as the horse veered off course. He cussed a lot. But he never hit us.*

Farming life for the Frakes family included the rented house, barn and silo. Row crops like corn and beans would have taken a season to plant, grow and harvest so they also kept pigs, chickens and a few cows. According to Ione, they moved into the farm by Thanksgiving. The plan worked well at first. John wrote to Madison (Capitol of Wisconsin) to get information on truck farming and raising chickens, pigs and cows. In the spring they began selling butter, buttermilk and cottage cheese. Later, they had all the vegetables they needed. That money allowed Rose to buy flour, salt and all the things they couldn't grow.



Mary Frakes with here cousins and siblings.  
Back L. to R. June (Cousin) Ione, Mary Front Gene (Cousin) John.

Well water pumped by hand from a ground source supplied the house and an outhouse furnished with old Sears Catalogs provided for sanitary needs. Clothing and linens were washed by

hand. I hold a personal memory from the 1960's of an ancient wash tub and hand crank ringer used to squeeze excess water out of the fabric. The wash tub sat in the back

yard of Rose's two flat apartment a year after John had passed away.

### **From Bad to Worse**

As fallout from the Great Depression worsened, John was unable to find work to pay rent and other expenses.

Financial pressures mounted. Before losing their home on Mt Vernon Ave in West Allis, John and Rose purchased an insurance policy to cover their household goods, including furniture.

Homeowners insurance, as we know it today, did not exist as a bundled package in the 1930s. Instead, homeowners purchased separate, specific insurance policies to cover different perils. Personal property was covered under the fire insurance policy, which was the primary form of property insurance at the time.<sup>16</sup> When the family moved to the farm, they brought the furniture with them. As financial pressures mounted, John had his back to the wall. Reasoning that he could collect on the insurance policy covering the family furnishings, he decided that arson was the only way out.

Without consulting Rose, he waited until the kids were off to school and Rose was out running errands and burned the house to the ground. Unbeknownst to John, Rose, who was in charge of family finances, had stopped making premium payments on the policy in an effort to save money.

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<sup>16</sup> Homeowners - The First Decade, by Frederic J. Hunt, Jr.

The fire quickly consumed the entire farm house, leaving the family no place to live and no insurance money to collect. The total loss of the house meant separating the family once again. Fortunately they had relatives in West Allis who were willing to take the children in until John and Rose could find another farm house to move into. How they managed to finance the rent is a mystery.

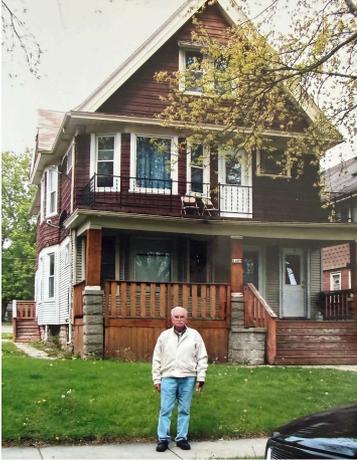
Ione describes the second farm.

*There was a huge barn that had stalls for about ten or twelve cows. We usually had seven or eight cows at a time and often a new calf. The barn had a couple of cats that kept us well supplied with kittens; at the same time kept us free of mice.*

*Daddy took great pride in that barn, and the cows. It was as clean as anyone could keep them. He would whitewash the barn regularly and we kept it mucked out several times a day. The cows were brushed daily. When we were in school, Daddy did it. Those forty acres kept our family from having to go on welfare. Back then it was called outdoor relief for people without work during the depression. We could go to a place once a week and get free groceries. We had to walk to get them and carry them home.*

*We had huge fields of alfalfa, which is the Caviar of Hay to the cows; the smell of it was incredible. Not even bread, fresh from the oven, could smell as sweet. When Daddy and his neighbors cut the hay and filled the barn it was like a religious*

*experience. I knew God had given this gift to me alone. From that day forward that barn was my refuge, my church and my hiding place.*



My father, John Floyd Frakes in front of the 2 flat they rented in 1933 at 1409 S 59th St. West Allis after living on the farm.

## **Back to the City**

Life on the farm only lasted a few years.

According to Mercedes,

*In 1933, as lone was about to enter High School, Mom and Dad decided to move into town where there were better schools. Things were a little better, and Daddy got a job with the PWA*

*/Public Works*

*Administration. We rented a duplex in West Allis at 1409 S 59th St., West Allis. That was a real culture shock to three-year-old little Johnny. He went around telling everyone about the wonderful house we lived in where you just pushed a button and a light went on, turned a faucet and water came out, even one for hot water, and an inside bathroom, with a big white bathtub. The rent was \$30 a month.*

Then tragedy struck again. 19 year old Mary was hospitalized with an initial diagnosis of appendicitis. Soon the diagnosis changed to cancer. Within weeks, Mary was

gone. Ione and Mary were close and her loss must have been devastating. In her memoir she recounts Mary's passing.

*Mary had been in the hospital several weeks and the doctors didn't know what it was, as the surgery showed that the appendix was fine. Daddy and I were sitting in the living room one day, when we heard a loud knock on the door. I looked to Daddy for instruction and he said, "Answer the door."*

*I jumped up and opened the door; no one was there. I told Daddy that no one was there and he said it must have been the downstairs door; we lived in an upper flat. I ran down the stairs and found the door locked. I knew I had heard the knock on the upstairs door. I looked out on the porch to make sure no one was there and went back up to tell that to Daddy. He said, "Dammit! I know what I heard."*

*Just then our downstairs neighbor called up to us and told us the hospital called and Mary had taken a turn for the worse. Mom and Daddy left for the hospital and came home later with the news that Mary was gone.*

It was Ione's belief that Mary had knocked on their door just before the neighbor called, "I am sure, to say good bye." Mary and Ione were close. As the older sister, Mary taught Ione how to dance in the kitchen on the second farm. Years

later Ione said, “I don’t think I ever danced the polka afterwards, that I didn’t think of Mary.”



Rose (Willette) Frakes and siblings on a visit to Grammans Chinese Theater, Hollywood, Los Angeles, California, Cir 1959

By 1940 Russell (Bus) was back home from Colorado. The census lists John, Rose, Russell, Mercedes, Lloyd and my father all living in the apartment. Ione

was married in 1939 at the age of 19 to 36 years old Bernard Driggs, a machinist from West Allis. They set up their home across town and soon had a son, Bernie, my cousin. John’s oldest daughter, Carsonetta, was also married with her own children and living back in Zanesville running a cafe with her husband.

### **The War Years**

John Clifford Frakes was 51 years old when the United States entered World War 2. Too old to enlist, especially with his amputated fingers, John continued to employ his jack-of-all trades talents and eventually got a job with a small factory working as an oiler performing maintenance on machines. He also kept up side hustles. My father recalls

accompanying him on various odd jobs in their ancient Model T Ford truck.



The former Lutheran parsonage at 723 North 28th Street in Milwaukee. My grandparents purchased the home and turned it into a boarding house.

*If he went somewhere, I went with him. I remember tagging along to and from various landscaping jobs. On the way home he would say "I'm going to stop and get a beer." I would wait for him in the cab of the truck outside. That's where I learned about patience.*

John and Rose's daughter Mercedes, who would

eventually go on to become a successful artist, also tagged along and helped John generate income in the landscaping business.

*I was able to help Daddy with his money making schemes. He would take me to a wealthy neighborhood, stop near a house that was not as prosperous looking as the neighbors' houses. I would make a sketch of it, then go home and make a nice drawing of the house, and Daddy would tell me what kind of trees and shrubs to put around it. He would then take the drawing to the house, show them what their house could look*

*like if properly landscaped, and most of the time he would get the job.*

## **A Life of Faith and Charity**

Years later, Mercedes wrote,

*At this time we all went to the "First Ward Mission", a little church on the second floor of a Barber Shop on 69th and Greenfield. We went on Sunday morning, Sunday evening and on Wednesday evening for Bible class. There was no organ, very few hymnals. There was a little wooden box attached to the wall at the door for anything you could afford, but it was enough to pay the (the ministries) rent and lights. The fact that the Pastor's son was my age, Eddie Schutzniter and he was sooooo cute; may have had something to do with my religious experience. It was one of the best churches I ever went to, as it not only taught us about God, but how to apply his teaching to help those around us. My Mom and Dad were prime examples of how to live a Christian life. No matter how little we had, they always found a way to share with anyone who really needed help.*

The family also stayed close to Rose's family back in Chicago. According to my dad, several of the Willette's had work during the depression and likely helped John and Rose out financially. Donald Davidson, Rose's brother-in-law, was a general foreman in the car works at the Pullman Rail

Car Company on the south side of Chicago. On special occasions John and Rose would load the children into their Model A Ford and make the 90 mile drive south to Chicago.



John Clifford Frakes Cir, 1944

*Our Ford didn't have glass windows; it had black curtains with small squares of Isinglass, said Ione. (Isinglass was a fish-based plastic like material used in the side curtains of some Model T Fords and other products.) a*

*In winter, before we started out, Daddy would light a lantern and set it on the floor of the back seat." Ione remembered. "He would put us on either side of the lantern. We were warned not to move our feet or the lantern might get kicked over and start a fire. He then covered us with a heavy blanket called a buffalo robe. I think it contained the whole buffalo. It was so heavy. More often than not we would get a flat tire. It would take us from noon until after dark to get to Grandma's. Needless to say, we were cold, tired and hungry when we arrived.*

Family accounts of the visits were remembered fondly with plenty of food and laughter. The Willette's were also a musical family. Ione recalls,

*There were fourteen of them and six of us and it was always a crowd. Everyone gathered together in the living room when Grandma would say to Ernie, "How about some music." Ernie played the sax. Earl would get Grandma's washboard and borrow her thimbles. Eddie played horn. Those three could make the most wonderful toe-tapping music this side of Heaven. Laurie and Willie would roll up the rug and Deennie, Dorothy, and Delores would start dancing.*

Sometime after May of 1942, John, Rose and the family were living in a rented home at 24th and Wisconsin Ave in Milwaukee behind the famous Eagles Club. They were able to scrape together enough money to make a down payment on a home. St. Paul Lutheran Church, located at 2812 W. Wisconsin Ave, Milwaukee, decided to sell their parsonage adjacent to the church building. According to the congregation's history,

*After the resignation of Pastor Karl A. Hoessel, the parsonage, located at 722 North 28th Street, was vacant. At a congregational meeting on September 15, 1942, it was voted to dispose of this property, and the Church Council was authorized to carry out the sale of the same.<sup>17</sup>*

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<sup>17</sup> St. Paul Lutheran, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1966 Anniversary

John and Rose purchased the property for \$6,200 on a land contract. A land contract offered buyers a way to purchase homes by paying the seller directly. This often exploitative practice allowed the seller to hold possession of the deed until final payment. If the buyer paid off the loan early, they had to pay a penalty.

The family lived in part of the old parsonage and then rented out extra rooms to meet the exploding demand for housing in the closing days of World War 2. The home became a focal point for family gatherings such as meals and card games. It had a large parlor, kitchen and numerous upstairs bedrooms. An important feature was a radio that John picked up in trade and restored to working condition.

In addition to local stations, the radio was capable of pulling down shortwave transmissions from European stations, a feature of great interest during the war. On the back of the wooden console was a port labeled (TV). Early radio manufacturers like Philips and RCA anticipated the advent of television and predicted that consumers would purchase a television tube for the visual portion and use the existing radio for the sound. Things didn't work out that way.

A favorite Sunday afternoon pastime was listening to the Chicago Cubs radio broadcast featuring legendary announcers like Jack Brickhouse and Bert Wilson, on WGN. My dad tells a story of the family sitting on the sofa

listening to the game. “At some point Rose fell asleep and Daddy went and dug up some bright red nail polish and painted her nails red! Just for laughs.” My cousin Bernie remembers him listening to marching music on the old set and delighting as his young grandson paraded around the parlor.

### **Final Days**

John Clifford Frakes died on Wednesday, April 25, 1945 just one month short of his 55th birthday. Chronic hypertension led to a massive stroke. John’s oldest son Bus called to say that his truck had broken down. True to form, John headed out to help his son when he was struck down. According to family reports, they laid him on the sofa in the parlor and called a doctor. The doctor arrived and gave the family the news that nothing was to be done. No hospital. No ambulance. Just a long wait until the end. Rose laid him out on the dining room table while family gathered to pay respects. He left behind my grandmother Rose, five children and many grandchildren.

### **Epilogue**

Rose Frakes lived in the former parsonage turned rooming house on 722 North 28th Street serving as the host of regular family gatherings that featured her cooking stills and evenings playing cards. She died in 1972 following a stroke after attending her grandson’s wedding in Colorado. Ione went on to have four children, Bernard, Margaret, Beverly,

Diane and Jean. She also became a writer in her later years, authoring several children's books and works of poetry.

Mercedes had four biological children of her own, Jack and Jerry with first husband Ray Henning and Judy and Bill with her second husband Hilbert Bruss. She and "Hilly" also adopted two children Mike and Kathy. In addition, Mercedes became a prolific artist and art educator creating hundreds of oil paintings, ceramics and other works of art. Her public commissions decorated many local establishments.

Russell (Bus), spent the remainder of his days devoting himself to serving his family, wife Dawn, Rusty, Bart, Diane and Sharon, and Shannon. He also dedicated himself to helping extended family.

Lloyd served in the United States Navy during World War 2 as part of Task Force 7, in the Southwest Pacific. He then went on to serve as an executive in the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM). He married wife Shirley and had two daughters, Pam and Coleen.

John went on to serve in the United States Marine Corp, First Division, 1st Marines during the Korean Conflict, where he was wounded during combat and then received the Purple Heart. He married my mother Carol (Weil) Frakes

and they had three children, John Clifford Frakes, Barbara Ann Frakes and myself, Timothy Patrick Frakes.

Was writing this short biography worth it? I think so. As with other stories I have developed over the years – Martin Luther, J.S. Bach and many others – I come to feel as if I actually know the person I am writing about. This is also true with my grandfather. A connection has been created that didn't exist before.

Every life has value. John Clifford Frakes's life is valuable to me.

Tim Frakes  
January, 2026  
Lombard, Illinois