

My maternal grandfather was Otto Jay Farris. He died in the 1940's so I never knew him, and my mother barely remembers him. He was an onion farmer, trying to feed a family of six children during the Great Depression. In 1929, his shipment of onions to NYC was returned and he not only wasn't paid for the onions, but he owed a return freight bill on the shipment.

He could still feed his family because he had a skill much in demand. He could turn corn into the excellent smooth whiskey with his still in the cellar. And his home brewed beer was coveted also. His products were preferred by all the movers and shakers in Columbia City society, the foundation of society--all the names we know: Gates, Lehmborg and the local judge and sheriff. Grandpa Farris kept a customer list in a little black book that no one touched. It helped to know the preferences and tastes of his customers.

His oldest son, my Uncle Waldo, was a teenager at that time. He told of going to Chicago with his Dad to sell whiskey to Al Capone. The sale was made at a dark tavern full of men and he remembers being afraid and backing out of the door.

The word came down that the revenueurs were going to raid the farm, but the customers didn't want their supply cut off. The sheriff, himself a good customer, came out to warn Grandpa Farris to dump the evidence. He couldn't bring himself to destroy it, so took the equipment and some prime elixir back to the woods and hid it in a swamp. The searchers were also skilled and found it. He was sentenced to six months at the "penal farm" as it was called then.

The youngest sister at the time, my Aunt Sue, now 90 years old, remembers the raid. "We were all sitting around the table and all of a sudden a huge man stood in the doorway. He filled up the space. We were so scared. They were all just huge men." She was 8 years old.

My Mom, who wasn't born until 3 years later, tried to get more details of how the family survived during those six months. They certainly had no money. Public assistance as we know it didn't exist. Uncle Waldo worked for some nearby farmers. Sue remembers him coming home carrying a home cured ham, so apparently neighborly charity helped out.

Uncle Whitey, another brother, was fascinated when Mom burned the black book with the customer's names in it while Dad was incarcerated. He knew a judge's name was in it, too. He also knew that no one touched that book and dad was going to be angry.

The oldest child, my Aunt Vivian, was at Wesleyan College in Marion, Indiana during this time. She was sent through the generosity of maiden school teachers, the Lemon sisters of Larwill. Aunt Vivian missed the raid, but as the oldest her memory of the time would've been the most clear. Years later when Aunt Vivian was 90 years old my Mom asked her about the details. She was embarrassed and refused to talk about it. The hurt and shame for her lingered on, over 70 years later.