

This Week in Saratoga County History

Somebody's Out There! Growing up in Greenfield

Submitted by Joseph Bruchac January 14, 2026

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Bowman's Store 1952

Bowman's Store. That is what everyone called the place where I spent my childhood. A little gas station and general store in the Adirondack foothills crossroads of Greenfield Center. I was raised by my maternal grandparents, Jesse Bowman and Marion Dunham Bowman. Jesse was a dark-skinned man who tried to hide his Abenaki Indian ancestry. He raised me to manhood without ever admitting his heritage, yet today I am known as an American Indian storyteller and writer. How did this happen? The process was not linear or orderly. But I know where it began. It began in Bowman's store.

"Somebody's out there!" How many thousands of times did I say those three words or hear my grandfather or grandmother call them out?

“Filling station” was the phrase used back then for a gas station. Because there were three Flying A Gasoline pumps out in front of our general store—two for regular, one for high test—we always referred to our store as “the station.” Middle Grove Road came from the west to end there at Route 9N and the “T” those roads shaped made Splinterville Hill a perfect location for a filling station and general store.

Our house was right next to the store. It had been built on the stone foundation of an older house, the one my great grandparents had owned. Our house was large, even larger than the old one. But the station started out being small. When I was three years old, not long after my parents had left me to stay “for a while” with Grama and Grampa, the station was one single ten by twelve-foot room, with a long overhang in front of the building to cover the two concrete islands for the gas pumps.

In the warm months of the summer and the early fall, my grandparents would sit in their chairs out in front of the station, waiting for customers. But in the winter, it was too cold in there to sit and wait, especially for old people.

So my grandfather put in “the buzzer.” When the front door of the station closed, a button was depressed. When it opened, the button clicked out, closed the circuit, and the buzzer – which my grandfather placed over the door between the dining room and the kitchen – went off like a hundred bumblebees.

“Somebody’s out there,” one of us would yell. And then who was ever closest to the front door would go out to wait on the customer— if there actually was anyone there. Ingenious as my grandfather was, he was never the world’s most efficient handyman. He figured that a hammer and a lot of nails could solve any problem. Adjusting the buzzer was one of his main pastimes.

A wind would come up, the door would swing open and the buzzer would go off. Grandpa would pull the spring tighter and cut off the straightened piece of metal that had been the end of the spring. Then he would reposition the hook that held the end of the spring, add another nail for good measure just to hold the hook in place, and step back. The door would then slam so hard because of the tension of the shortened spring that it would knock the buzzer clean off the door frame and leave it hanging with that sound like a nest of angered hornets emanating from the house.

Since the cry of “Somebody’s out there” was, as often as not, more hopeful prophecy than certainty, neither of my grandparents was all that quick to be the first out the door. By the time

I was six, I was always the first to go out, a bright-faced emissary delivering the message “They’re coming.”

Then came television. I was in second grade before I saw it for the first time. Some of the other kids in my class said they had seen it. One girl, known for her drastically imaginative exaggerations, swore that her parents had one- although no one was ever allowed to visit her house to verify that assertion. Television was a far-off and distant thing in our world, as unlikely for us to have, it seemed, as a heliport on your roof would be today.

One autumn day, though, I got off the big yellow bus and my grandmother was not there to greet me. That was unusual, for I had been having trouble with the bigger boys on the bus. I was a small child with a big vocabulary and as fond as that made my teachers of me, it did not endear me to my classmates.

So now, tightly clutching my pencil case and my Hopalong Cassidy lunch box, I dashed out the bus door before the other boys who got off at the corner stop could grab my collar. I was across the road and up the concrete steps before their heavy feet crunched the gravel. I pushed open the porch door and stopped. There sat a big cardboard box that I had never seen before. My grandmother was sitting in her chair, but she hardly noticed me. My grandfather was on his knees in front of something as tall as our windup Victrola. But where the doors of the Victrola would have disclosed shelves to stack 78-rpm records there was a white, flickering screen. It was...a television.

Grampa fiddled with the three round controls on the front of the console. “Mebbe this” he said. Then as lights and lines shaped themselves more distinctly on the screen, the high-pitched whirring sounds of static were replaced by a human voice. It was a women’s voice, singing “When the moon comes over the mountain...”

The picture wasn’t much but the voice was something! We sat there watching it, listening to it, for hours. People came to the station and I left the room only long enough to shout out to them, “We’ve got a television, come and see it!” Before long, our living room was filled with people. No one had ever seen anything like it before. Things had changed. There was a new center to our lives.

And then came *Gunsmoke*. It became my grandfather’s favorite show. When Marshall Dillon was on the screen, nothing could make my grandfather move. The buzzer would sound, horns would honk from prospective customers waiting for gas, but if Grampa was alone he’d go no further than to poke his head out the door and call out: “I be only an old man. Pump it yerself, and put

the money in the cash register.” If we were home, it was always my grandmother or me who would go out, when the streets of Dodge City were in sight.

My grandmother was the one in the family with the business sense. She handled all the money and kept all the records. My grandfather could barely read or write. The reason he was nearly illiterate was a simple one. It was because of the way he’d been treated in the one room schoolhouse in Porter Corners. Poor, dark-skinned and dressed in rough homespun linsey-woolsey clothes, he’s found few friends in that little white building. Finally, when he was in fourth grade, something snapped.

“Somebody called me a name,” he told me. “I flattened ‘em, jumped out the window and never come back.” “What did they call you Grampa?’ I asked him.

There was a long pause before he spoke. “They called me an Indian.” he said.

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