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# *In Her Own Words:* The Story of Alice Testrake

COLLECTED AND ILLUSTRATED BY VALERIE WALAWENDER

*These stories were told by Alice Testrake at her home in Ripley, NY, in the winter of 2013–2014. Family members were sometimes present. The stories were collected and illustrated by Art Facilitator Valerie Walawender, MA, as part of Hospice of Chautauqua County’s Art Enrichment Program.*

## **My Early Years**

*Alice:* I was born in Coder, PA, at my grandparents’ place on May 20, 1924. Of course, I don’t have memories of my first few years. I knew my grandparents. I had a great-grandmother I knew real well. We just called her Grandma. My great-grandmother was my dad’s grandmother. We’d go to her house in the fall, just about every fall.

It was her birthday. She liked to eat. Everybody took a dish to pass. I think we had to go to Oil City. The sun was shining real nice one day. We were on her porch. I had an uncle. Uncle John. Someone had a magnifying glass. (While he slept) any one of the kids held a magnifying glass over his bottom. He got burnt. He was “hot”—a little bit perturbed. When we were young we didn’t have all this—video games. . . . We had to make our own fun.

I had a sister older and a sister younger. I got my oldest sister in trouble when I was in high school. My uncle played football. The people in high school thought we were twins (my oldest sister and me). Virginia (my sister) didn’t like it. One day the coach came up to me and asked me, “Where’s your brother?” I told him that John was not my brother. He’s that other Carnes girl’s brother. She got mad because I had said Uncle John was her



Portrait of Alice Testrake, 2014. Photo by Valerie Walawender.

brother, not mine. So he got in trouble for not being in school. Uncle John was just two years older than we were.

Virginia was my oldest sister. Maxine was the youngest. There were three boys: Jim, Henry, and Bob. I was second. I just had a sister younger than me. My brother Bob is 10–11 years younger than me.

My grandfather, their name was McAfoos. He was my mother’s father. He liked to go hunting. He’d go hunting on his deathbed, I think. He chewed tobacco.

*Paula (Alice’s daughter-in-law):* That’s why they called him “Tobacco Juice.” Ron used to tell me that.

*Alice:* My grandfather always made our skis for us in the winter. We had dozens of cousins. He made a sled for us. There was a “crick” just down below the house. He always had a swimming hole. He’d clean it out to make the swimming hole.

He was a farmer. Back then they grew wheat, hay, corn, and oats to feed the animals. They had two horses. Sometimes they had three or four cows. They had pigs, chickens. Cats were in the barn. For some reason, they never had a dog.

Walter and Loretta, my aunt and uncle, never had a dog either. They’d let the horses out. There was a watering trough in the woods. You’d let the horses out. They’d have to go as far in the woods for the watering trough, as far as Myra’s, the first house up the road. They’d go out and drink and come back. Nobody went with them. The cows, they’d always have to have somebody with them. You’d put a rope on them and lead them out. The watering trough never froze in the winter. The crick always froze in the winter.

My grandmother’s name was Louisa Hice. My grandmother always wore an apron. She’d always say, “If your nose is clean, you can come in.” One day the pastor came. She never looked. She was busy. It didn’t bother her. She was surprised it was the preacher.

She was right out with the boys. She made things for Halloween. Coder School was, half of it was my relations. She made a list of things you had to hunt for the scavenger hunt for Halloween. She made cookies for Christmas. We had cookies galore. Molasses. Sugar.

When it came to butchering, she’d help butcher the pig. They made their homemade whatever. They called it liverwurst then. You could have it in a sandwich. You could just have it on a plate. I don’t know what it was made of, but it was delicious.

*Paula:* Your grandma was Louisa. Your middle name is Louise. I put two and two together and realized you were named after your grandmother.

*Alice:* I am also named after my mother’s aunt. Mom had an Aunt Alice. She’d be my great aunt. My father was a farmer and drove truck for the highway department. My mother kept house. She had six kids.

I’d have to walk to school. One mile to the one-room schoolhouse. Three miles to the high school. You always wore a dress when you went to high school. You could wear anything when you went to Coder School. Nothing much happened in high school.

## The “Hoopie”

*Alice:* When I was in high school, my uncles, they wanted a tractor. They didn’t have money for a tractor, so they made one out of an old car. They called it a hoopie. And that’s what I learned to drive on, a hoopie. They took all the sides off and the roof. We had a lot of fun learning how to drive a hoopie.

The farmers got tired of using horses, so they made a “hoopie.” They made them out of old cars. Usually a small car. A big car would be too big to put in the cornfield. A hoopie is an old car. They took the sides and top off to make it just like a frame. You had the seats, two seats. My uncles made the one I drove because they couldn’t afford a tractor.

## After High School

*Alice:* After I graduated, I went to Erie to work with one of the girls I graduated with. One friend and I came to Erie, and

we both worked at Lord’s. I don’t know what they made. It was during the war years, and everything was top secret. We rented a place there. The place we rented was from her sister. Then she got married and moved out. I found another place from my Italian landlady. She made her own spaghetti and sauce. It was really delicious. She was a good cook. I had my own apartment in Erie. And it was closer to work. I worked at Lord’s. When working there, a bunch of us girls got acquainted. We worked in the same department. Thirteen of us girls decided we wanted to rent a cottage out by the beach. Three bedrooms, one bath. That was a lot of fun, because if one of us wanted to take a shower, you just took a bath in a rinse tub. After work, there was a beach between us and the lake. We still snuck down and went in the lake. We all worked the second shift. We had to work 4:00 to midnight. We didn’t fuss too much with our hair. We hung out on the beach. One day, we all went into town on a bus and went to a movie.

There was Dorothy and Betty and Esther and Doris and Eva and Marilyn. Oh! I can’t think of any more.

That was my first experience with drinking and smoking. It didn’t last long for me. On the wharf, Betty and I’d both take a swig of beer and throw up. We decided that wasn’t for us. Smoking only lasted three days. I couldn’t stand it.

It was a lot of fun. One day we called



“The Hoopie.” Illustration by Valerie Walawender.



"The Grapes." Illustration by Valerie Walawender.

in sick. We told the nurse we had food poisoning. We knew the nurse. She told us we needed a doctor's permit.

### Meeting My Husband

*Alice:* I met my husband in the grapes. I came down with his sister one weekend. They were picking grapes. He was there to help pick grapes. He was on leave from the army for a week or two. I just thought he was just another man. I guess I would have been 20 when I first met him. We started going out. I don't remember how he asked for our first date. I guess it wasn't very impressive.

My uncles were still calling me "Tommy" when I got married, because they thought I was a "Tomboy." Uncle Russel, Uncle Howard, Uncle Walter. They were my mother's brothers. They were all McAfoos. We got along. Everybody pitched in to help. None of them farmed. Russel worked in a factory in Ohio. Howard worked in a service station. Walter—I don't remember what he did do.

When we dated, Carl and I, we'd go to a movie. You went uptown where that place is covered with plastic, near the library. That used to be a restaurant. You'd go there and have a hamburger or a bowl of chili.

He would have been 33. He was 13 years older than me. He had to milk the cow. If he didn't like it, we could get rid of the cow, and we could buy milk.

We got married when he was on leave.

I got married in '45. I was 21. I was married twice in the same day. We got mixed up. We were going to get married at the church in Erie. My husband, he got the marriage license here in Ripley. So we had to get married before noon in Ripley and after noon in Erie. I had my long gown for the second (ceremony). I had my suit on for the first one.

We had a small reception at his sister's house in Erie. Then we went to Niagara Falls. We spent two days and two nights. His sister was Gertrude. The lady where I stayed, her daughter gave me slippers for "something borrowed." The lady I rented from, she gave me a hankie that was "new." We had finger sandwiches and cake, because that was when everything was rationed out. We went to Niagara Falls that evening.

We rode on the *Maid of the Mist*. We toured around Buffalo. He was in the service yet then. He had to go back to California the day we got back from our honeymoon. He was discharged the first of the next year, the first of '46. I moved back down with my folks till he got back. We wrote letters back and forth. The letters were all about the same, the news of the day. There are none left. I'm not one to keep stuff, I guess.

I quit working when I got married. When he moved back, we moved in with his parents because he had to help with the grapes. I got along well with his sisters.

### The Older Generation

*Alice:* We were married five years before we had any kids—before Tom was born. When Tom was born, Carl's mother (Della) was in bed, so I had two to take care of. She didn't get out of bed. She died in bed. In 1950. She'd seen her grandson Tom born. She was in her late 70s. We had the funeral. We went on like before. It was still hard. We made it through. When I had my baby and Carl's mother to take care of, I thought, "It had to be done," so that was it. Of course, Carl's father was a big help. I didn't have to peel potatoes or shell beans or shell peas. He did that. I don't know how to explain it. To me, something that had to be done, you just did it.

Carl's father lived with us after his mother died. Carl worked the farm and drove bus, and his dad was getting up there. We had a grape farm. My husband drove school bus for 20 some years.

His dad would farm with a horse. His dad wouldn't drive a tractor. He took me to Home Bureau lots of times and would



Portrait of Carl and Alice Testrake on the occasion of their 50th wedding anniversary in 1995. Courtesy of Alice Testrake.





Alice Testrake's parents, Frank Carnes and Iva (McAfoos) Carnes. Courtesy of Alice Testrake.



Alice Testrake's mother-in-law and father-in-law, John and Della Testrake (Carl's parents). Courtesy of Alice Testrake.

pick me up. The Home Bureau, it was like Farm Bureau, but for the women. Men joined the Farm Bureau to learn agriculture. The Home Bureau was for women to learn cooking, sewing, and crafts. We did caning and knitting. We made tree skirts. I made a baby's yellow sweater set and a fake fur rabbit for Easter and a sock rabbit. We made the clothes for it. We made a big doll. We made baskets and macramé. I made a big Santa Claus. My grandson liked it so I gave it to him.

I was offered \$200 for that picture up there [Alice points to the "Woodland picture" on her wall that she made at the Home Bureau], but I could never part with it. We had to go to the beach to gather driftwood. The pictures weren't all the same. The moss was green when it was put on there. It's just made of everything you gathered outside, except there's a deer, squirrel and a bird, a little dog. I think there might be a goat. The building is made out of grapevines. There are acorns, pinecones, fungus that you get off dead trees. That was there the year you [Pat] and Cheryl graduated from high school. When was that? '74. That's how long that picture has been hanging there.

Carl's father (John Testrake) died when Ron was a baby in '57. Ron was my fourth child, when their grandfather died. He was 90 when he died.

My parents lived down in Brookville. They didn't live here. I had Tom, Bob, and Pat and Ron before Carl's father died. Ron was 3-4

weeks old when his grandfather died. I had good help with everything. His daughters would come to take care of him and stay with him if I had someplace I wanted to go. I still belonged to Home Bureau at that time. They'd come and stay with him, so I could go to the grocery store. Things like that. They would look after their dad.

### The Kids

*Alice:* We took that trip out west. Pat would have been a year and a half old. We went in '58. August. Tom would have been eight. Bob would have been six. Ron would have been about nine months. He wasn't that hard to take care of.

### Tom

*Alice:* Tom was raised mostly by his granddad. His granddad worked in the grapes and garden. He made a little hoe for Tom. I always said he was raised by his granddad. He followed his granddad.

### Bob

*Alice:* Bob was a devil. I'll admit to that. He's probably listening, thinking that's not something you tell people. He decided one day he would go out on the highway with his little trucks and cars. Pretty soon, we heard cars honking and screeching. We looked out. There was Bob. He figured he could run his cars and truck on the yellow line because the others weren't using it. That's the last time he did that. We didn't paddle

or anything. We just told him that's not a safe place to play.

### Ron

*Alice:* Ron and Bob were instigators. Ron still is an instigator. He's worked at G.E. for 30 some odd years. He was a little over two years old before he got his hair cut. He had long curls, and everybody thought he was a girl, so we decided to get his hair cut. His favorite food was warmed up potato soup. He still really likes potato soup. He'd come up with mischievous. He made up the trails in the locust patch for his homemade go-cart. He was probably around 15. He was a mischief maker.

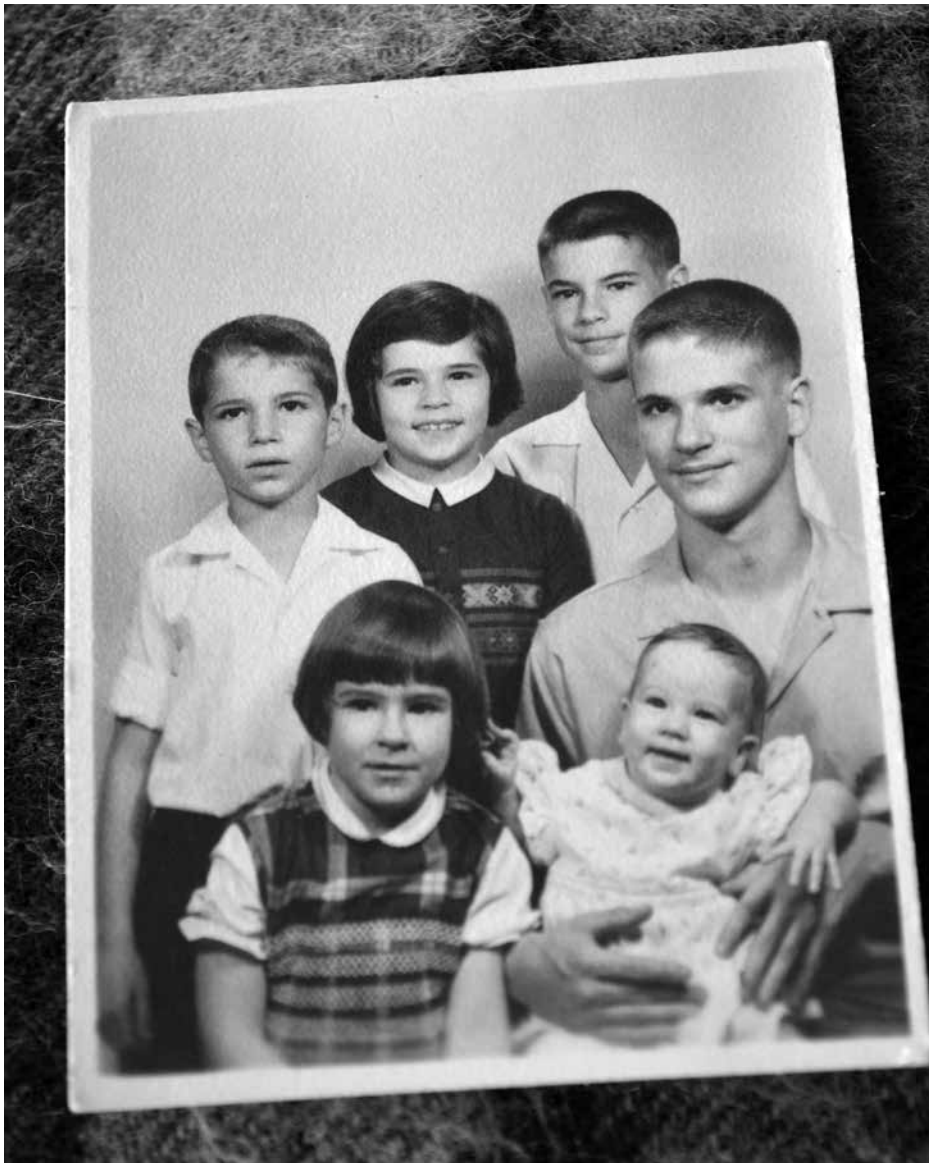
### Pat, Hog-Tied

*Alice:* We tied Pat up when she was born, to a tree, with a rope around her waist. People thought that was cruel. I said, "You may think that is cruel, but what if that was your daughter who got out in the road near the trucks?" We tied her to something back by the house.

*Pat:* "Yup, I was hog-tied."

### One Christmas

*Alice:* One year, we got the kids up on Christmas to go to Brookville to visit their grandparents. We had their presents all wrapped in the back of the station wagon. The first one got sick. It wasn't two minutes, the next one was sick, Then another one and another. They all said they were sick. They



Alice Testrake's children 1964: left to right, front row, Darlene, Pam; second row, Ron, Pat, Bob, and Tom. Courtesy of Alice Testrake.

“Sullivan.” In Sullivan you start in the front yard with a Frisbee or football and you’d throw it or kick it to Sullivan’s, which is the next place over. You’d have to go through the apple orchard and the grape vineyard, and the woods. That made it hard when you had to go through the woods. And then you’d end up in Sullivan’s backyard. But they were never there. They lived in Erie. They used it as a summer place. That was basically Sullivan. Whoever was the closest to the correct number of throws won the game. The correct number was somewhere between 75 and 100. We played Sullivan all the way from my brother’s house to here. I don’t know how many throws that was. We had to cross the thruway. Both Paula and Cindy were pregnant at the time. Did we ever get in trouble for doing this?

### Trip Out West

*Alice:* We were watching Disney World on TV. When the kids got up the next morning, they wanted to know why they couldn’t go to Disney. They didn’t know it was on the other side of the country. We got to talking about it. We hadn’t had a vacation. We talked to the doctor because Ron wasn’t that old. He told us to take disposable diapers. He gave us medicine.

Before we went to California, we stopped at John Testrake’s on the way out. On the way back, we stopped at Brookville before we ended up home.

We took off to California. We bought a tent, propane stove, and air mattresses. We went in August. We pitched a tent every night but two. We stayed with Aunt Maxine. We went to the Pacific Ocean. The kids went in, but not me. We went to all the National Parks. Grand Canyon. Bryce Canyon. Yellowstone. Big Redwoods. Hoover Dam. We went to the Badlands. Salt Lake Desert. Death Valley. The High Sierras. Petrified Forest. We stopped at Mount Rushmore. We stopped at Carl’s father’s half sister’s. We stopped at my uncle[s] and my aunt [s] in Cincinnati.

[The trip was] about four, four and a half weeks. We could stay in those national parks. Now you have to wait years to get a reservation.

were pretending. When we got back home, nobody was sick. So that’s the last time we ever tried to go to Brookville on Christmas.

*Pat:* Your gifts are in the back and you can’t touch them. It was torture. They didn’t think that through very good.

### Pam and Darlene

*Alice:* Pam was born. Darlene would pick flowers and bring them in. She’d put them in the crib where Pam was. Pam was allergic to all those flowers. Pam couldn’t breathe. After 3–4 times, the doctor said, “Are you doing anything different?” Then I thought of the flowers.

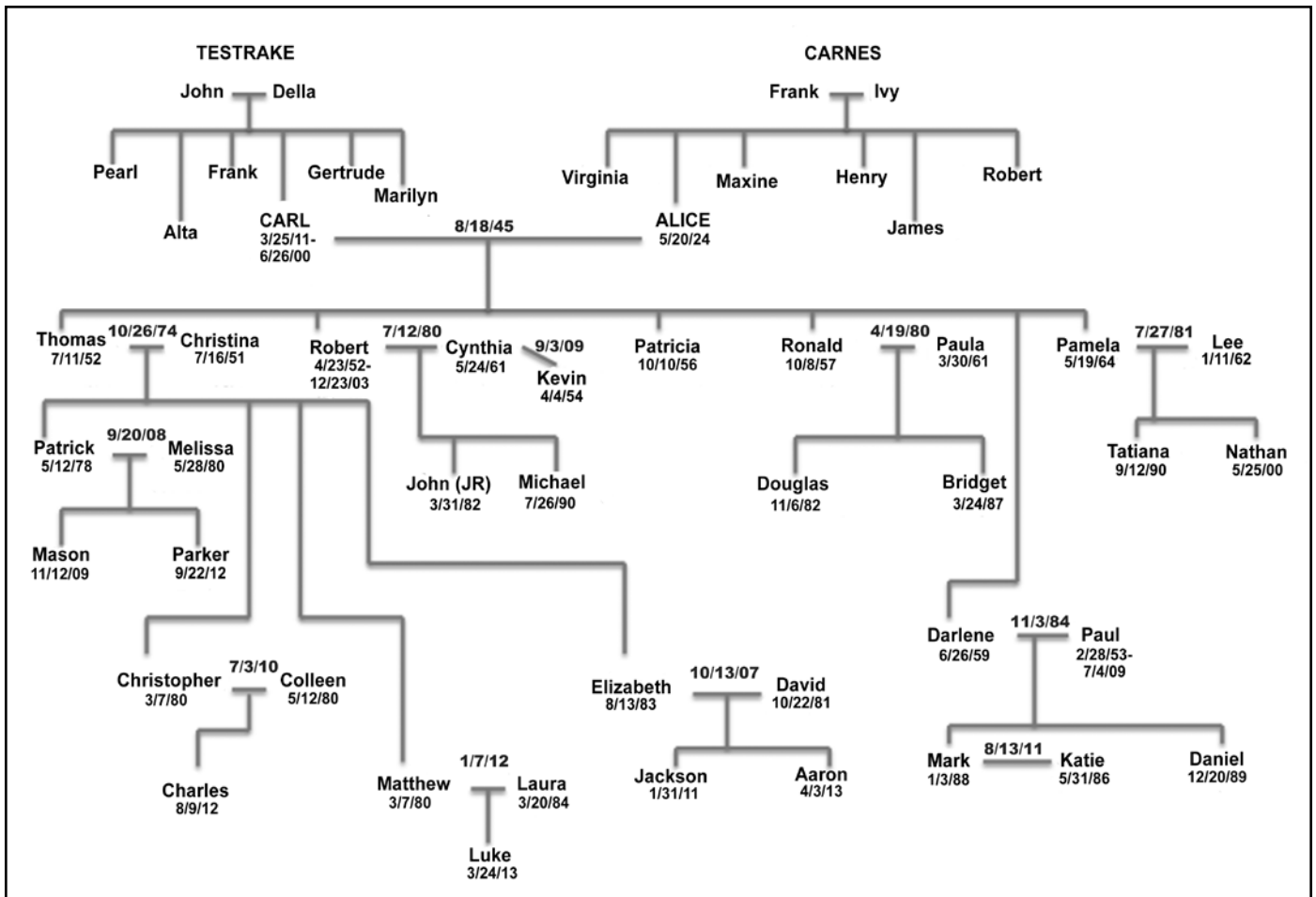
### Pat’s Memories of “Sullivan”

*Pat:* My memories center mostly around the farm. We’d make our own games. We’d play cowboy and Indians. Climb the apple trees. Throwing green apples.

We’d get rotten tomatoes. We’d put those on the end of a stick and whip those at the barn, trying to hit the barn.

Sledding. We’d start up on the thruway bridge on Wiley Road. We’d slide all the way down to Route 5. It was a half mile. They made their own roads among the apple orchard.

The favorite game we’d play, and the kids still play, the grandkids even play, is



Alice's Family Tree. Compiled by Pat Testrake. Courtesy of Alice Testrake.

## The Grape Tour—'81 or '82

*Alice:* The only thing next I know, we took the grape tour. We flew to Vancouver. We saw all the grapes. We got on a bus. We went to the state of Washington. We flew to California. I saw the Golden Gate Bridge from above and crossed it, then saw it from below. Ron drove us to Fredonia. We met the other people who were going on the bus tour.

## A Trip to Holland—'85

*Alice:* My father-in-law, John Testrake, was from Holland. Winterswijk was the name of the town. He came to the US in 1886. He didn't know any language except his native Holland [Dutch]. Carl wanted to go and see where his father was born and raised. That's where we went for our 40th anniversary. We were gone for two weeks. We saw the house where his dad was born and raised. The houses were different from the houses here. Some of them had barns right with the house.

We were married in '45. Went to Holland in '85. Doug (Paula's son) would have been three. Doug was in the picture.

## Alice the Adventurer—Wish List

*Alice:* When I was going to high school, everybody was saying they wanted this and wanted that, so I made a wish list. I think you remember what you wished for.

My wish list consisted of a hot air balloon ride, white water rafting, and Alaska.

I took the hot air balloon ride in 1997. I did white water rafting in 1999. I went to Alaska two times. The first trip was 2001. The second time was in 2004, after we lost Bob.

I went to Canada and New England on a cruise in 2011.

We could talk to people on the ground from the hot air balloon. The hot air balloon was fantastic. You could see the animals run in the cornfields. We didn't go over water. He

wouldn't go. There's spotters that go along. They went in a car with a trailer in the back, to take the hot air balloon.

The white water rafting was fantastic. Because I went with my son and grandson. I fell out. They got me back in. Doug fell out and got back in. We had hot dogs. They were delicious. We had to carry the raft to where the starting place was.

I said, you raise a family, you couldn't do all that stuff. Six kids.

The next thing was my first trip to Alaska. I went with the Shriners. They were trying to get enough people to make a good showing. We went to Pittsburgh. We flew from there to Vancouver. That's where we got on the boat. They would sail at night and pull into ports in the daytime.

Ketchikan. We made a stop there. Seven days on boat, three or four on land. When we pulled in ports. In the morning, there were tours. I took about three.



You could go swimming. They had a library. They had where you could play cards or games. We could watch the ice floes, glaciers. Boy, would it make a noise when it would crack and fall in the water! We saw whales and all kinds of seals. In the main lobby, they had all kinds of things out of ice. People showed how they made things out of ice sculptures.

We landed in Fairbanks. The big park Denali. Mount McKinley is in the National Park.

In Alaska, we went to the park. When we went there the first time. On the north side, you could see those goats. I thought they were goats. They were white. They had real big mosquitoes. The second trip was more fun than the first one. I saw more things. I took the second trip two or three years

later. Pat and my friend, Rose. We flew out to Vancouver. We took the boat out there. We went to Ketchikan, Juno, Seward, and Skagway.

They took us in by a salmon factory. They canned salmon like you'd buy in the store. There was a great big salmon factory. I never saw such big salmon. The salmon place was right there.



Alice holding a photo of herself as a young woman. Photo by Valerie Walawender.





Alice and 10 of her family members went ziplining on October 18, 2014. Her son, Ron is with her on the ride down. One of the workers told the family that Alice was the oldest to go down the zipline. Her daughter, Pat, reported that Alice had so much fun, with the biggest grin on her face throughout the zip, that Alice said she wants to do it again early next summer, before it gets too hot to climb the steps. Photos courtesy of Alice Testrake.

We went on the train down in their gold mine. They let us pan for gold. Nobody got much. I guess they weren't going to let us take much of their gold. We took a boat ride. It went around to different places. We saw where they catch the fish. The people would do their own salmon. Catch them, clean them, and hang them up to dry.

We saw where the lady had dog sleds. She had the dogs, too. In the summertime, they still have them. In the summertime, they pulled sleds with wheels. They took care of their dogs, just like they were people.

We saw the Alaska pipeline. All you saw was the pipes as far as you could see. Both ways. They were real big.

They had those big cabbages. They were planted in boxes on street corners. There was a vine growing. In the center were those big cabbages. They were big as bushel baskets.

We went into a restaurant. That's where they had that big dahlia. It was over six feet tall. It was bigger around than a dinner plate. They had real nice flowers.

It was daylight all the time. I said you can take pictures at night.

On that boat, everything was chocolate.

We had entertainment. They had movies, floor shows, singing, and dancing.

I done the rock climbing on the boat. I started up. When I was about two-thirds of the way up, I lost hold of one of the rocks. I've had my experience. When I got to the bottom, some young man came up and said, "I hope I'm as agile as you are when I'm 80!"

We had to fly back home.

Since then, I did take another cruise. Boston to Nova Scotia. We stopped and saw the wild huckleberries. The tame ones are blueberries. We stopped in one restaurant and had huckleberries pie. We stopped in ports. We got to Nova Scotia. It was nice up there. Their houses were built a long time ago, and they kept them up. They had big rocks.

I didn't like the train ride from Erie to



Alice Testrake, white-water rafting, age 75. Courtesy of Alice Testrake.



Alice Testrake tubing on Lake Erie at about age 75. Courtesy of Alice Testrake.

Boston and back. I was on it a long time. There was a place you could eat. It was too long, especially after flying places.

That trip was two or three years ago.

### These Days

Update from Valerie Walawender: *Alice “graduated” from Hospice in May 2014 (her prognosis improved so much that she no longer qualified for Hospice Services). I can’t help but think that her zest for life has had so much to do with her improved condition. She provided*

*the following update on her life at 90 on October 11, 2014:*

Lately, I’ve been to Olean. I’ve been up to Erie. I’ve been to Kevin and Cindy’s. If they have too many steps, it’s too hard for me to go up. Kevin was there to help me. I’ve been to Brookville to see my brother. I go out to eat quite a bit. I do some cooking. I peel the apples for apple pie. I get my own breakfast and my own lunch, and start supper. Sometimes I have two or three great-

grandsons that come. They have a ball here, because they get to run. They have room to run. The kids’ toys are back out again. We put them away, and now they’re back out. That’s the first place the boys go, is to the toys. I’m trying to get back into things. I’m going to go “zip-lining” at Peak ‘n Peak on October 18th. I graduated from Hospice in May (2014). It was before my birthday. There was 78 people here [when] I turned 90. They all said they were coming back in 10 years. My neighbors keep pretty close watch over me.

I don’t go to the bank anymore. Pat does my banking. ▼

Valerie Walawender, MA, is Interim Curator of Folk Arts at Castellani Art Museum at Niagara University and instructor of folk arts at the university. Walawender also leads the Art Enrichment program for Hospice of Chautauqua County, working with patients and their families as an art facilitator. Awarded a patent and accolades for her diversity and violence prevention tool and methodology, Walawender’s Faces in the Crowd Program has been endorsed and adopted by the M. K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence. Walawender’s MA degree in Liberal Studies from Empire State College was focused on folk art, community documentation, and the development of art-based tools and methodologies to assist people who have experienced trauma. For her BFA degree from Florida International University, she focused on documentary photography. She lives in Western New York with her husband. They have two adult sons.

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