

A Wolfe Island Wake in Wintertime

Wolfe Island was a different world 50 years ago

Island residents face their toughest winter in years. The ferry Wolfe Islander operates on an erratic schedule because of the ice.

Kingston Whig-Standard, January 25, 1963

Air service to Island is restored. The Kingston Flying Club is charging \$1 each way from the General Wolfe Hotel on the island to the Kingston Yacht Club.

Kingston Whig-Standard, January 30, 1963

Every year during early March, I remember it clearly. *If anything happens, jump as far as you can but hang on to her.*

As a child, I well remember crossing the ice to Wolfe Island. I never really enjoyed the ride be it by car, horse drawn sleigh or snowmobile but it was a necessity between January and mid March if you needed to cross to the mainland, or vice versa. The former side loading ferry *Wolfe Islander*, unable to push through, would tie up until spring. Islanders were left to cross on their own as best as they could. Mid-winter was safe. However, the closer you got to spring thaw, that's when the danger set in. Sink holes and water pockets would appear.

Fifty years ago this month, it was necessary for my younger brother, my sister and me to get over to the island from our home in Kingston. Our grandfather John Johnson had suddenly died and we were to attend his 'wake' at the farm. Until then, death or dying had never really been mentioned in our family so we kids were unfamiliar with grief and what to expect. Mom and dad had flown over in a ski plane with pilot Doug Wagner two days previous, landing in the field just behind the house. The ice was considered unsafe just then. It had to do with the wind direction.



Typical island winter (Wolfe Island Historical Society Archives)

I was okay until I looked out and saw the surface of the ice from inside the warm cab of my older cousin Dick Kingsley's truck. He had come over to pick us up. It had started snowing again. From the bottom of West Street I well remember my insides starting to churn as I saw the island itself, three miles away, barely visible in the blowing, drifting snow. The vast, snowy wasteland with dark patches and water pockets was marked into a roadway by leftover Christmas trees placed sporadically several yards apart. At least I wanted to think that it actually was a frozen wasteland

– not an ice bridge where sixty to eighty feet of water lurked underneath a thin shell; deep dark water from Lake Ontario, just off to the right.

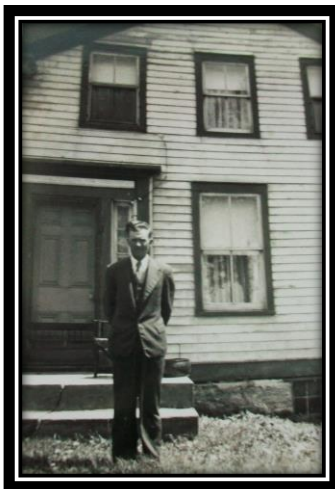
“All set?” Dick asked. Everybody nodded. “Okay, Brian, open your door. Barry, you hang on to me. Lu-Ann, you hang onto Brian.” He then looked over at me. “Now, if anything happens, jump as far as you can... don’t wait. And hang on to her.” Seat belts didn’t exist then, not that we would have been wearing them. The gears made a grinding noise once as he placed the gearshift into first gear. Popping the clutch we rolled down the ramp as the tires splashed onto the mushy ice road...

I was nine years old that early March of 1963, the year Grampy died. My brother was eight, my sister six. I held the truck door open with my right hand while my left squeezed hers. I started counting the Christmas trees. *Splash* went the wheels. Some of it sprayed up the side of the open door. Dick shifted into third, as we picked up speed. Tree number four... the snow was really swirling now as I stared straight ahead... number five... can hardly see... almost halfway... he knows where he’s going... number six... *splash* again, followed by a bump. I swallowed hard and bit my lip.



Spring thaw, dangerous ice road, Marysville Village, Wolfe Island, 1958 (Buck Mullin Collection)

“Let go, you’re hurting me!” It was my sister. She was trying to pull her hand away. I didn’t even turn to look at her. Let go? Not on her life. Number six... or is it seven... Garden Island looms just ahead... we’re in the shelter of the bay. Funny how it gives you a false security; I knew it even then, Mr. Ogle drowned after his truck went through the ice here just a few years ago...



Grampy at west side of house. ‘The snow drifted up to the second story windows’

Driving out the highway to the Fifth Concession was like driving through a tunnel. Snow banks were almost as high as the telephone poles. The township road was the same, only narrower. And still the snow continued to drift. Arriving at the farm, the scene was almost surreal. Cars, trucks and horse drawn sleighs were everywhere. The snow plow men had cleared the roadway and the entire lawn and farmyard. Snow had drifted almost up to the second story windows along the west side of the house. It was standing room only inside.

“We had to walk from the Baseline Road,” my cousin Jim Johnson recalled. “It had been snowing and drifting hard and the plow hadn’t got through yet, so we just walked through other people’s tracks, with snow to our knees.” This would have been for a

quarter of a mile. "Then, we walked back to the roadway and had to walk from the highway into Uncle Howard's out on Button Bay Road. Grandma Johnson was waked there." My great-grandmother Ettie Johnson, John's mother, had died the following day after her son. So, at the height of one of Wolfe Island's worst winters in years, with no ferry running, bad ice and plugged roads with snow up the side of most houses and barns, there were two Wolfe Island Roman Catholic wakes following that weekend. Mother and son, at two different farmsteads.

Everyone parted so we kids could walk into the parlour. There was a strong smell of fresh flowers, warm cakes and pies the minute we entered and walked through the warm kitchen. Nana hugged us, gave us a weak smile and walked in with us. We still had our coats on. Grampy wasn't seated in his chair just around the corner where I had found him nearly every time we visited. His chair wasn't even there. Instead, lying flat in a long, varnished cabinet it seemed, surrounded by vases of colourful flowers and dressed impeccably in his best suit, wearing his specs that he only wore when cutting our hair, was Grampy, eyes closed with his rosary wrapped around his folded hands. A mounted, gold crucifix looked down at him. I think I just stared.



Grampy's chair: Tipper, Grampy, Brian, 1956

"The term 'wake' was an old custom to make sure that the person was actually dead," said Island historian John O'Shea. "Most everyone turned out for a wake. Weather was no excuse. It still isn't, really, only no one is waked at home over here anymore. It's much easier at the funeral homes now. People came until almost midnight and then one or two stayed up all night with the corpse. The priest, in this case Father Ryan, came and said the rosary in the evening."



Nana and Grampy, last weekend together, harness race on the ice, Wolfe Island, 1963

We knelt down, as directed by mom and dad, and made the sign of the cross after about a minute. People were milling about and talking in every available corner and space of the house. Conversations were about the terrible weather, how much stored hay was left, who had calves 'coming in' and the ice road. Getting up from the kneeling bench I found my Uncle Harold, who looked like he hadn't slept in a week. He and my Aunt Clare had come over for a wintertime visit when a sudden heart attack took his father just as they were leaving for Church that Sunday

morning. Again, I'll never forget the phone call, that Grampy had collapsed and they needed a doctor. Dad made some calls to fly a doctor over with the flying club when the second call came. He was gone. They were sure. Making arrangements for us, mom and dad left within the hour.

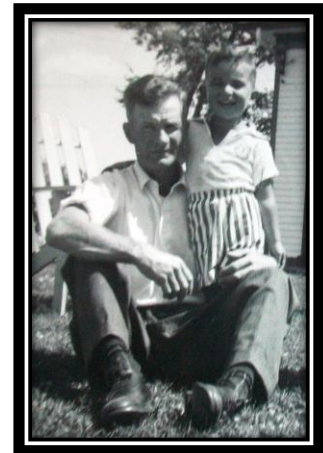


Johnson farm, wintertime, 1950s

Walking upstairs, we kids tried to stay out of everyone's way. The kitchen door might as well have been propped wide open; people were coming and going constantly. Horse drawn sleighs were coming across the fields. I looked out at the barns where the cows were strolling about. The horses were in their stalls in the horse stable. And then it hit me. Just who was going to look after them now? What will happen to the farm? There were cows, pigs and horses to feed. I guess dad, Nana and Uncle Harold will

make some kind of an arrangement with somebody. I didn't know it then, but the cows and pigs, the milk delivery truck and the chugging sound of the milking machine would be gone the next time we visited. We kids didn't attend the funeral. We returned home to Kingston across the ice later that evening. I never saw Grampy's chair again.

No matter how busy they were, Nana and Grampy always made time for us. Now that I recall, we saw more of them in the winter due to the convenience of the 'ice road'. Summers were at the farm, riding the buckboard with him for a load of stone from Reed's Bay, riding the mower with him pulled by the two draft horses, Pat and Daisy and ice cream cones from Marie LaRush's in the evening. After chores, we would visit nearly every relative they had on Wolfe Island, playing cards until they would rouse me up from someone's couch. Why, I think they had a better social life back then over there than Cathy and I have now, over here. They really did. Looking back, there's no doubt about it. Being over on the island with them were truly the happiest years of my childhood.



John Johnson (Grampy) and Brian, 1958

Our granddaughter Ruby calls *us* 'Nana and Grampy' now.

We just *gotta* live up to that.

Brian Johnson is Captain of the *Wolfe Islander III* and proud Grampy to Ruby DiRinaldo.