

Memories Set Down: James K. Brobst

These memories were set down by Janet Binkley. They were told to her by her mother, Elva Caroline Brobst Ramage.



Kistler Mill, birthplace of James K Brobst.

Located outside New Tripoli, Pennsylvania.



Oswalds Mill / Kistlers Mill Lehigh Co. | Pennsylvania | USA | 1808, restored 1998-2006

Mother's dad, James K Brobst (called Jim), was born August 18, 1955 in Kistler's Mill on Ontalaunee Creek a bit northwest of New Tripoli, PA, where his father Benjamin K. (also for Kistler) worked at the time. However, Jim spent later years of his childhood on a farm on Kistler's Road near Stony Run, PA, not far from the Jerusalem Red Church (Allemaengel) known to all of us who delve into the lives of the earliest American Brobsts. Apparently Jim left home early, about the age 12. His mother, Carolina Mosser Kistler Brobst, once said her heart was breaking as she saw her boy so young walking off down the road alone carrying his few belongings.

At first Jim worked as a helper to a storekeeper, sleeping in the store at night. When he was old enough, though, he got work on the railroad and trained as a telegrapher.

Marrying Martha

He must have been sent to the Hazleton area, because he met and married (around 1875) a Hazleton girl, Martha Elizabeth Yost (born April 20, 1859), whose father Reuben Yost was a carpenter in Hazleton. By the time their children were arriving, Jim was station agent for the Lehigh Valley Railroad in Tomhicken, a town of 300 or 400 people on Black Creek, west of Hazleton. His six living children were born there during the 1870s through 1890s.

The family made visits to relatives' farms. The visits were cheerful and noisy and there was lots of good food, only Mother wouldn't eat the chicken after she saw that the outhouses were built up off the ground and were open at the back so the chickens could run in and out and peck at what ever was edible there. As a young child, Mother also wasn't always happy that the family were great huggers and kissers – the uncles had scratchy beards.

Jim Brobst was happy in Tomhicken and turned down opportunities to move to bigger towns, such as Hazleton – why put up with the hassle of a large station? In Tomhicken he was not only station agent but also postmaster and could read everybody's newspapers and magazines before these were picked up. He headed the school board that ran the two-room school up the hill in the town. I expect he had plenty of social life, talking with the other railroaders and the men from the local mine, which the railroad served.

The Tomhicken Way

Martha, on the other hand, under the class distinctions of those days, probably didn't have many women friends in Tomhicken – my Mother remembered that as a child she was only allowed to play with the children of the local mine manager and one other white-collar family, not with the children of the miners, who were recent immigrants from Central Europe and were referred to as "Hunkies," although they surely weren't all from Austria-Hungary. I'm sure these prejudices kept Martha lonely in Tomhicken. Fortunately, the railroad provided free passes for employees' families, so she could make excursions to visit relatives and friends in Hazleton, about an hour away. Occasionally Martha did some shopping in Hazleton, but there was no need to travel to buy most necessities. Salesmen brought things to the house in wagons. The meat and fish man came regularly, as did the man with vegetables. Things like flour and apples were bought in quantity – every fall Jim bought a certain number of barrels of apples, each a different type, and during the winter

the children regularly helped sort through the barrels, taking out any apples that were going bad so that these wouldn't infect others.

And of course, there was a family vegetable garden behind the house. Jim dug it and sowed the seed, which he handled the way a farmer did a wheat field by hand, broadcasting the seed upon the soil. Martha never could get him to plant things in neat rows!

Living in a Railroad Station

Since Jim Brobst's family lived in quarters that were part of the railroad station – kitchen and living room behind it, bedrooms above – the children played in the station, in Jim's office, and all around the station outside. Fooling around in her Father's office one day at the age of 3 or 4, Mother came across her Dad's chewing tobacco in his desk and gave it a try. He came back in and found her with brown juice running down from both corners of her mouth, dripping on her white dress. She said he just told her not to do that again (perhaps another example of the gentle manner I noted later among the members of that family). From then on, she just chewed raw oat flakes seasoned with sugar and cinnamon, which the kids carried around in one of their Dad's former tobacco bags.

Jim Brobst was quite a reader and Elva remembered the family gathered at night around the dining table with a tall oil lamp in the middle. There didn't need to be a set bedtime for the children – with the soft light and quiet people at the table, children just got sleepy and went off to bed when they liked.

The bedrooms upstairs were of course cold in the winter; only the one shared by Mother and her older sister Mary got heat from the downstairs stove's flue that passed up through that bedroom's wall. When friends or cousins visited overnight, the girls got warmer by sleeping together in what was called spoon fashion.

The family had its own entrance into the house part of the station building, and its own outhouse. A big black wool shawl hung by the door, and everyone threw it over their shoulders to go out to the outhouse in cold weather. One winter the outhouse caught fire and burned down in the night in the midst of a big snow. Some poor tramp had used it for shelter and built a fire in it to get warm.

Raising a Family

Mother (Elva), born May 9, 1896, was the last of Jim and Martha's children, and much younger than the rest because two just before her had died, one of them as a result of a miscarriage after Martha fell down the back steps. Martha almost lost Mother, too, when her appendix burst at age 9. The family doctor came, but without antibiotics, there was nothing to do but stand by and hope. Elva remembered little of that raging infection except the pain whenever anyone jostled her bed. Can't you imagine how Jim and Martha felt, just waiting to see whether that child would pull through? Well, Elva did pull through, but Jim and Martha lost another child later. Warren, born in 1889, had become a telegrapher and was still living at home when he contracted blood poisoning from scratch on his arm and died, age 23 in 1912.

Elva, as the youngest, was able to finagle more formal education despite her Dad's belief that girls didn't need anything beyond what the local two-room school could deliver. The school on the hill only went to 8th grade, but under Pennsylvania law, local children could go to a neighboring high school if their own school district would pay a fee to the other school. Elva and her Mother cried for two months until Jim gave in and as head of the school board arranged for Elva to go to a high school two miles away. It meant walking, and Mother said her most vivid memory of the next two years was walking in deep snow and then sitting through classes with her long skirts wet to the knee.

After high school, Elva wanted to go to college at Bloomsburg State Normal School on the Susquehanna River about 50 miles away. Again Jim said no, and Martha and Elva went into tears. This time he broke down in two weeks. He said Elva could go to Bloomsburg to get a teaching certificate if she'd agree to come home and teach afterwards in the Tomhicken school. She did the, and taught the upper grades for seven years, living at home in the Lehigh Valley Railroad Station with her parents and her sister, Mary, who hadn't married.

At some point there, Jim bought shares in the Pennsylvania Power and Light Company for Elva and Mary, saying girls needed to have a little money of their own. For both of them later, having a bit of income their own was a real satisfaction.

Elva talked her dad into buying the first radio in Tomhicken, a crystal set that had to assemble themselves. Then she talked him into buying a car. This required a trip to

Hazleton. I wish I could go back and watch them trying to get it home, after a brief demonstration by the salesman in how to drive, over dirt roads, mountains, narrow valleys. The car did turn out to be a real pleasure for everyone, and interesting, Jim was pleased to let Elva be the one who taught herself how to drive first. It was steep country – you couldn't leave the house at the station without going up a steep hill either side of the creek – so I can imagine it took a bit of learning, with those early un-timed clutches and gears, to get around the Tomhicken area. Gasoline was fed by gravity in that car, from a tank in front of the windshield that fed down a line into the engine.

They sometimes had to back up a hill if it was really steep, as the gasoline wouldn't run forward and down into the engine if the nose of the car was too far up.

In the winter of 1923, Martha became very ill and died of kidney failure March 28, 1924. Except for Mary, the older children (Pierson, Edith, Wilbur) had been married for years, and Elva married the next fall and then left for Arizona the summer of 1925, leaving Mary to care for her Dad. Jim retired and left Tomhicken. When he died of heart failure July 25, 1932, I think he was at the home of his oldest daughter, Edith, Mrs. Frank Riegel. He was buried in Hazleton in the Vine Street Cemetery next to Martha.

Looking Back

Jim Brobst's life was in an era of transition. After 100 years of farming in the valleys of Pennsylvania, the extended Brobst family in the mid 1800s was already breaking up – population pressure meant that young men like Jim needed new jobs, and these were provided by the mines, railroads, and steel companies that took over the state. Looking through the early censuses, you see the Brobsts listed as first yeomen then farmers, millers, and storekeepers with extended families in each dwelling. By the mid 19th century, the censuses recorded Brobsts who were miners or railroaders or young people living in Allentown boarding houses or working in the kitchen at the college at Bloomsburg. By the time Jim died in 1932, the country was in a deep depression, his children were scattered, and cars, electricity, and radios everywhere were influencing the way life was being lived.

Ten years ago, I went back after a gap of 40 years to Tomhicken. The station house is gone, just a few foundations covered with grass, and most of the town was gone, too, with just a scattering of houses left and the dead mouth of a mine down by the creek. I also went back to that valley where the Brobsts first settled, near Stony Run and the Jerusalem Church. I

was amazed at the beauty of that still rural area, lovely farms filling the great valley, with the long ridge of the Blue Mountains behind, and famous Hawk Mountain at the southern end. Today, what you see is the newest wave of change brought by increased population and the automobile – housing tracts sprawling over former farms and cars choking the roads that lead to Allentown or wherever there are jobs.

Where the Brobsts first broke the good valley ground among Indians in the mid 1700s, today's Boomers are seeking the peace they don't find in the cities where they work. But their houses and their cars, like ours, are degrading the very beauty and tranquility we seek.

I wonder if Jim Brobst, a hundred years ago, regretted the railroads and mines or blessed them as lifesavers for him and his children and his many brothers, sisters, and cousins.