



# PANNEBAKKER FAMILY NEWS

NEWSLETTER OF THE PANNEBAKKER FAMILY ASSOCIATION

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## Uncovering the story, and the person, behind a 109-year-old photograph

By John Kelly



The boy stares from the photograph with a knowing look. He's not smiling. He's not frowning. He's not smirking. He looks as if he's coolly appraising the photographer.

It's an old photo. The 9-year-old boy is clad in a stiff white collar, a floppy bow tie around his neck. We know how old he is because of what's written on the back: "Feb. 17, 1912. D.W.V. 9th birthday."

And we know exactly who he is from what's written next: "**Donald Wellington Velsey.**"

The picture was in a bag of old newspapers, receipts and photographs that **Josh Calder** took off the hands of a neighbor in the Chevy Chase neighborhood in D.C. She had no connection to what was inside and may have picked up the ephemera at an antiques store, perhaps to use for collages.

"Little mysteries from the past provoke me, particularly the photos of people who I feel should be remembered," said Josh, 56.

The papers and photos came into Josh's life at the beginning of the pandemic. Perusing them was a welcome distraction.

"I thought, 'Well, maybe I can find some amusement,' " he said. "The main thing that pushed me into action was that there was a lot of information on it."

Equipped with a name — an unusual one at that — and some dates, Josh quickly found information on Donald Wellington Velsey online.

"Then I set it aside for a while," he said. "I hit a dead end. Recently, I picked it up again. This time I found this person seemed to have a son."

And that son lived in Washington. Josh made a copy of the photo, put it in an envelope with a letter and mailed it to an address in the Foxhall neighborhood. There, 87-year-old **Don Velsey**, a retired architect, opened it with astonishment. That was his dad, all right.

"I wasn't sure where the photograph could have come from," Don said. "Josh said it was just from a bunch of ephemera someone had given him."

Don said his father's family had lived in Washington for only a few years, 1913 to 1915. His father's father was in sales, moving around the country constantly. Don said he sold player pianos in Washington.

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“He would get dressed up as a performer,” Don said. “He really wasn’t. He just turned a little switch under the piano. That was his little shtick.”

His son — the boy in the photo — went into advertising, working in New York City and living on Long Island.

“I guess today we’d say he was one of the Mad Men,” Don said of his father.

This isn’t the first bit of stray family history Josh has reunited with a relative. After glimpsing a photo of a GI playing a guitar scratched with a name and town in a World War II documentary, Josh tracked down descendants in Kentucky. Hey, he told them, your great uncle’s on Netflix!

“The irony to all of this? By profession I am a futurist,” Josh said.

Josh thinks about the future for clients, who want good things to happen while avoiding bad things. Still, the past pulls at him.

“Obviously, we all sort of want to be remembered,” he said. “But it’s a losing battle, isn’t it? It’s hard to be remembered by anyone at all beyond your grandkids. And what does it even mean to be remembered by the universe?”

“That’s why I like these photos. The photo may be the only photograph of that person that exists in the universe. And I don’t want to just let it go.”

We are all grains of sand in the vast dunes of time, our pasts blown away and replaced by the future.

“I actually think they’re rather parallel situations,” Josh said. “You can’t know either the past or the future. The further you go out in either direction, the more blurry and fuzzy and uncertain and inaccurate those things become.”

For just a moment, let us focus on Donald Wellington Velsey, 1903-1981. His family lived on Brown Street NW, off 16th Street. He was a Boy Scout, one of the first. He hiked in Rock Creek Park and once saw **Woodrow Wilson** being driven in an open-topped car.

“My dad said he stood alert on the side on the road and gave the Boy Scout salute and the president saluted him back,” Don said.

He was a standout athlete in school. But he always thought his crowning achievement wasn’t in sports or advertising, but aboard a wooden cabin cruiser when he was in his 60s.

“He and my mother and I took this old Richardson motorboat from Long Island down to Fort Lauderdale on the Intracoastal Waterway,” Don said. “He had never done any long-distance sailing. A thousand miles in a one-engine boat with no experience was pretty outrageous.”

Of course, when that photo was taken, that voyage was in the future. And now it’s in the past — as we all will be some day

## Speaking of old photographs!

Photography of people started in the mid 1800's and spread famously in the United States during the Civil War. Several members have contacted me for help in finding old photos of family members. I know many of you have photos of people in your own line and possibly photos of people in associated lines. Many of us have hit a wall in our search for photos of ancestors. It would be wonderful if we could find a way to share photos with each other.

Those of us who use Family Tree Maker will have their photos in the Media file of the program. If you have shared your tree with Ancestry, photos should be in the Gallery.

Occasionally, I will find a photo of a "Pennypacker" and not be able to place the photo with someone living. For instance, the photo at the right is of Charlotte A. Masters, maiden name, Pennypacker. I know who her parents were, and I can follow her line back to Hendrick. The problem is that I don't know if she had children. There may be someone out there who is a relative of hers, and would like this photo, but I don't know who they are.



If you are searching for a photo or if you have a photo that might be of interest to someone else in the family, send me an email with the appropriate information and I will post the info on the web site.

email: [pannebakkerfa@gmail.com](mailto:pannebakkerfa@gmail.com)

web site: <https://www.pannebakkerfamilyassociation.com/>

## Welcome New Members!

### **Barbara Gale**

Hendrick, Henry/Jacob, Harman/Barbara, Harman/James, Harman/Susan, Martha Caveny, Elinor, Margaret Schrack, Margaret Whitelaw, Barbara

This one may need explaining. Two of Hendrick's sons were Henry and Jacob. Henry's son Harman married Jacob's daughter Barbara (1st cousins). Two children of Harman and Barbara were Harman and James. Harman's son, Harman, married James' daughter, Susan (1st cousins). Harman and Susan had a daughter named Martha, and so on.

This, first cousin scenario occurred frequently in the early generations of many families.

### **Elizabeth Allen-Pennebaker**

Friedrich, Johann Weigand, Friedrich Pennebaker, Peter, Charles, Charles, William, William, Jr., Elizabeth

### **Gregory Pennypacker**

Hendrick, Jacob, Matthias, Joseph, Benjamin, Lindley, Harry, Lindley, Lindley, Gregory, Gregory

## Officers

**President:** Ron Pennypacker  
520 Loch Alsh Ave.  
Ambler, PA 19002  
(484) 302-6842  
[r.pennypacker@yahoo.com](mailto:r.pennypacker@yahoo.com)

**Vice President:** Linda Millerick  
751 Monterey Salinas Hwy.  
Salinas, CA 93908-8953  
(831) 484-2834  
[lmcnealmillerick@yahoo.com](mailto:lmcnealmillerick@yahoo.com)

**Secretary:** Marcea P. Kligman  
4170 Summit Way  
Marietta, GA 30066-2346  
(770) 928-9055  
[mpklig@bellsouth.net](mailto:mpklig@bellsouth.net)

**Treasurer:** Ed Pennypacker  
271 Hafner Rd.  
Royersford, PA 19468  
[ed@jepcosales.com](mailto:ed@jepcosales.com)  
Tel 610 948-7867

## **Membership/ Newsletter/WebMaster/ Genealogy:**

Bruce Pennypacker  
201 Shady Brook Drive  
Langhorne, PA 19047  
(215) 380-1748  
[throwcoach@gmail.com](mailto:throwcoach@gmail.com)

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# *Pannebakker Family Association*



The Pannebakker Family Association is an outgrowth of the family reunion held at Pennypacker Mills, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania on July 2-4, 1999. The reunion celebrated the 300th year wedding anniversary of Hendrick Pannebecker and Eve Umstat, in Germantown, Pennsylvania in the year 1699. In the words of the Steering Committee of the reunion, "We hope that the 1999 Pannebecker-Umstat Reunion will lead to the growth of a family association, which will provide a forum for conversation, collection and preservation of information, and a sense of lasting community among the heirs of this rich cultural heritage."