Stevan Kerpics was born in Lorain, Ohio in April 1931. The Great Depression had just begun when he was born and the economy’s downfall became more widespread. By the time he was in school, the Depression had taken a toll on all of the communities he was involved in. His family was Catholic so all of the children of the family (two boys and two girls) went to the Catholic school behind the church. Most of the time they went to school after church on church days (Sunday, Wednesday, Friday) and the rest of the week they helped his father on the farm. He says that he and his brother, Donald, helped their father work the land and gather crops while the girls maintained the household. He did say that towards the end of the depression, his sister found a job at a grocery store, earning a nickel for a twelve hour shift.

Stevan remembers what it was like to go to school. “It didn’t matter how old you were, everybody was in the same building with the same teacher. We all read that same stories and worked on the same work. I’m not really sure how we knew how you moved on to the next grade; my guess is if you turned another year older and you were still in school, you got to move on to the next grade.” I was surprised when he said this, but then I had to remind myself that they didn’t really have any kind of assessments back then. The population was more focused on supporting the war and providing for their families, that education was put onto the back-burner. “When you went to school, you only went on church days, if your parents would let you. You started going to school when you were six and once you finished eigth grade, you had graduated. There was no “elementary school” or “high school” like you guys have today. It was you either make it or you don’t, we were all in “School”.

He emphasized to me that there wasn’t much pressure put onto children’s education. They were more worried about what was going to be on the table for dinner that week. Every now and then, they would eat with their neighbors across the street. “That was always fun,” he told me, “because Mom and Dad always wanted to impress them, and they always wanted to impress us. I never paid much attention to if it really worked, but I loved having all of the special foods. These were the times that my mother fixed the best Hungarian foods.” He then explained to me that his parents had come with their parents from Hungary when they were children. “They knew what a struggle was and had an idea of how to handle having limited funds from seeing their parents have to go through it. I think that this helped them more than people who had been here for a while and got used to having more than they needed.”

What surprised me the most about my grandfather’s educational and life experiences was that he could hardly remember most of it. He could tell you what they did on a day to day basis, but was unable to give direct details, especially about what they learned about in school. He still struggles with handwriting because they were never really taught how to correctly hold a pencil or how to write in the lines of the paper, but worried more about having the correct letters. He also emphasized that he is left-handed, but because of the way schools were, he was taught to only use his right hand. “We always were paddled if we used our left hand for anything. I always knew something was wrong because no matter how hard I worked, I couldn’t get my handwriting to be perfectly clear. One day, at home, I tried to write with my left hand and it was just as good with no practice. I never used my left hand in class or in front of my parents, though. That was a big no-no!” I can’t believe it was considered “wrong” to write with your left hand! I definitely would not have made it back then!