

BELMONT — Life was looking brighter for Lester on that crisp April evening in 1942. He'd had a fine supper of dandelion greens, cooked with pork fat and the fixings of good Maine fare, prepared for him by his wife of seven months.

Lester Francis Morse was born in Belmont in 1906, the youngest child of John and Jennie (Levenseller) Morse. He was exactly one year and one day old when his mother, Jennie died while giving birth to her eighth child, who died a couple of days later.

Lester was very close to his brother, Amon, who was 14 months older than he. The boys, with their older siblings, were raised by their hard-working grandmother, who was also raising several motherless cousins.

The boys learned early in life that they had to work to partially support themselves. Lester lived for some time with Aunt Etta and Uncle Fred Batchelder, doing farm work to earn his board. As he grew older, he worked on farms in the Belmont, Belfast and Searsmont areas.

When Lester was 27, he married Annie Rogers of Searsmont. Annie had older sisters who did not approve of their marriage, as they thought that he, being seven years older, was much too old for her. They considered him a ne'er-do-well, though he worked at the Knox Woolen Mill in Camden.

In 1935, Lester and Annie were interested in buying the Ernest Young farm in the Youngtown area of Lincolnville, but didn't have the money. His brother agreed to buy the farm, giving Lester a mortgage. They moved there with daughters, Helen and Joan. The twins were born at the farm.

Another of life's tragedies struck in the spring of 1940. Annie had been sick with an earache, which they treated with home remedies. She seemed better as Lester went to work at the Woolen Mill. The infection behind her ear raged. Finally a doctor was called to the home, where Annie died May 3, aged about 27 years. Annie's sisters never forgave Lester for her death.

Lester was left to care for

four motherless daughters, Helen, 6 and-a-half years old, Joan 5 and a half, with the twins, Flora and Florence, being 4 years old. Annie's sisters offered to take the girls between them to raise, with no interference from Lester. He was adamant the family be kept together. He had a succession of housekeepers, some of whom had marriage ideas, but he was not ready to remarry. He was feeling overwhelmed by his responsibilities and quit his job at the mill.

It had been a year since Annie's death, when he went to

Camden to visit a young woman whom he had met from his brother, Everett's neighborhood. He went onto the porch of the Kelletts' where Velmae Basford worked and asked for her. Lester told her that he wouldn't make any flowery promises, but he needed a housekeeper, a mother for his children, and that he would marry her. To the surprise of both of them, she said, "Yes."

Lester and Velmae were married in September 1941. Velmae was good for the family. Every morning she got the girls dressed, combed and braided their hair, and sent the two older girls off to school. The girls didn't have much for clothing when she went to the farm. She made them dresses, matching panties, and whatever else they needed. She and Lester had hatched out chickens and built a henhouse across the road, with a brooder stove to keep them warm. At Christmas, Velmae and a neighbor, Trigger Carver, made life-size rag dolls with a wardrobe of clothing, one for each of the

girls and Trigger's daughter.

On the evening of April 1942, Velmae had cleaned up the dishes after supper, put the girls to bed, and was darning socks in the living room, while listening to the gramophone that she'd brought with her when she came to Lester's home. He told her that he was going next door to Clyde Young's to make a phone call to George Hardy about a carpenter's assistant job.

Velmae looked out of the window and saw Lester standing in the road in front of the house, talking to a man whom she didn't

recognize. She stepped to the door and heard Lester say, "I'll be right with you."

Sometime later, Clyde came to the house and asked where Lester was. She answered that she supposed he had gone to Clyde's house to use the phone. Clyde said that he hadn't seen him, but there was a huge fire in the vicinity of Leigh Richards' barn.

Velmae went to check on the chicks. She fretted if the fire spread, they'd lose the brooder house, chickens and all they'd invested. And where was Lester?

The dirt road was muddy, as happens in Maine in the spring. The fire trucks got bogged down in the mud. The Camden and Lincolnville trucks were within sight of the fire, but they couldn't get through. The neighbors tried a "bucket brigade" to no avail. The barn burned to the ground.

The next morning, Everett went to Amon's in Northport to tell him that Lester hadn't come home. There were few phones in the area at that time. The night before Amon had seen the fire from Northport, and had started to go to Youngtown, getting as far as Leigh Miller's. Those who had the old crank phones had passed the news from one house to another that Leigh Richards' barn was burning in Youngtown, so Amon turned back.

In the morning, family

members in Lincolnville, Northport and Belmont arrived at the Youngtown Road searching for Lester. They found the contents of his pockets, a pencil, a small notebook and other items along the road.

Lester was a tall, wiry man. To the family, it appeared as though he had been thrown over someone's shoulder and carried, losing the pocket contents. The cellar of the old barn next door was still burning. Richard Morse, with the curiosity of youth, peered into the burning remains, and thought that he saw a calf in the smoldering barn cellar. He called out to the adults, who determined it was the remains of a person.

Amon went to tell Velmae that Lester had died in the fire. She didn't remember much after that. Mr. and Mrs. Kellett from Camden came and took her to their house. She said that she didn't know what ailed her. She was led around and did as she was told. The house and children were Lester's. Her world was shattered. What was she to do, and where was she to go?

Lester's siblings all had families of their own, yet the family did not want to see the girls separated, or to be sent to the Girls Home in Belfast for orphans. Velmae loved the girls and they loved her.

Everett was appointed guardian of the girls. All of Lester's siblings helped in their own way, giving whatever assistance they could spare. They were of farming families, in a farming community, struggling from the aftereffects of the Depression. World War II had started. Amon told Velmae that if she would stay on and raise the girls, that he would destroy the mortgage, and the farm would be hers.