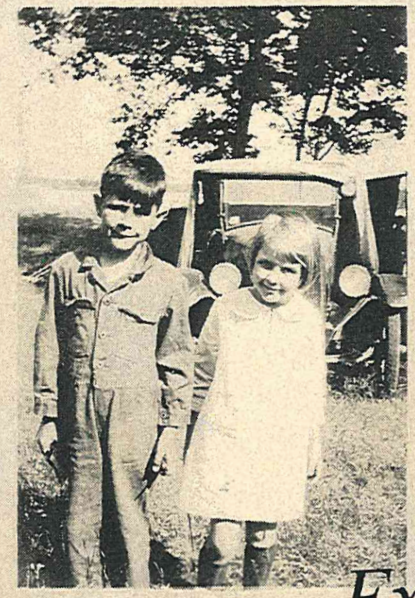

Excerpts From

Our Pages of Life

Volume XVIV
Summer 1997

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The stories within this volume of ***Our Pages of Life*** are written for you.
Without an audience, stories like these would probably never be repeated.
The life writing class these students are part of offers them
a chance to put in writing what they have lived.
Adding the years and experiences of my students makes thirty-plus pages
seem superficial; but cover to cover this book offers
a deep expression of a gamut of emotion, thought, and memory.
Among these pages lies a scope of things past. It's good to know that we are given
the opportunities to see things past become doorways of hope.
If you know these writers as parent, friend, or relative, then look for the ties
in these stories that bind your lives together. If you are unfamiliar
with the names of these authors, then listen for the echo of these experiences
in your own life. Enjoy them all. Thanks for listening.

❖ Joan Stear, USL
Summer 1997

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Special thanks to the English Department and University College
at the University of Southwestern Louisiana and the Horizons Program
at Lafayette General Medical Center for their support.
These thanks go out, especially, to my "board": for the push that comes to shove, the one that
convinces me that this kind of project would not only never get done but would never have a
chance at another volume if it weren't for you!

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Front Cover: (clockwise, beginning at top right corner) Jim Jennings, circa 1931; Neva Schexnayder Ducote; Jo-an Rogers Ralston and Jim Ralston; Virginia Cromwell; Beatrice Murphy (on right) and sisters, Vivian and Jeanne; Doris Bentley (on right) and brother, J. E. Broussard, 1926; (center) Verna Stutes

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USL LIFE WRITING CLASS
Summer 1997

***Seated, left to right*: Johnnie Kocurek; Virginia Cook; Verna Stutes; Beatrice Murphy; Neva Ducote**
***Standing, left to right*: Jim Jennings; Joan Stear; Mae Dorsey; Jo-an Ralston; Doris Bentley; Versie Foti; Curney Dronet**

***Class members not in photo*: Virginia Cromwell; Chris Westell**

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FIRST MEMORY
by
Neva Ducote

I was four years old in 1939, the year of my earliest memory. My family lived on a farm in Arnaudville, Louisiana. Dad was home that day. Mom and I waited for C.J. and Calvin, my two older brothers, and my sister Doris who were returning from school on the bus. It had snowed that day, and when Doris stepped on the steps of our house, the snow fell from the roof onto her. The laughter that followed envelopes my first memory with both joy and surprise. For my part, I remained behind Mom's dress as she opened the door to welcome my brothers and sister into our warm home.

MY FIRST MEMORY
by
Verna B. Stutes

The earliest memory I have about my childhood is when I was three and a half years old. My family lived in the country. We were very poor. As a toddler, I had never heard of Santa Claus. One day two fine young ladies named Beulah and Ina visited our home. They told me to go into the bedroom. There they showed me a picture of Santa Claus and said he would bring me something special. Sure enough, on Christmas morning there was a big red ball just for me from Santa. My brothers, John and Rawley, made another memorable Christmas for me when they gave me a doll buggy and a doll. I will never forget their love and my cherished toys.

BUGGY RIDE
by
Beatrice Murphy

We had moved from the big house to our little house down the road in Lafayette Parish. Nonc Ulysses and Tante Alice were living in the big house. Nonc Ulysses was over six feet tall and very eccentric. He painted the old house wild colors. The dining room was painted purple. Tante Alice, barely five feet tall, was generous of heart. My uncle and aunt had a family of thirteen children.

At that time my family didn't have a car (Daddy had sold his). We didn't own a buggy either, so come Sunday our cousins, Dan, Tom, Alta, and Agnes, would come for us in their buggy. Agnes and I would sit in the little box seat in the back. Our legs extended down over the edge. My sister Vivian would sit in the front with Dan, Tom, and Alta. Their horse, Belle, had a reddish coat and could really trot.

One Sunday we were on our way to church in Scott, which was about eight miles from home. On the way we met another buggy full of kids. We challenged each other to a race. Belle was moving so fast her hoofs were hitting against the front of the buggy. Agnes and I were holding on for dear life. I still have recollections of that bumpy ride. We were laughing and cheering on our driver, Cousin Dan. We won that race. By the time we reached church, we were not exactly in a prayerful mood. We hitched Belle to a post and sat together in our usual place on the left aisle in the front. I remember a woman tapping us on the back to quiet us. Mama, who had stayed home, never knew just how much fun going to church was. After mass we would go to catechism class in preparation to make out first communion.

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We shared quiet times with our cousins, too. At night Mama, Daddy, Vivian, Jeanne, and I would walk down the little country road. We'd never meet anyone. It was so dark, quiet, and lovely. We'd come to the old wooden bridge over the coulee where we'd linger a bit. We could see the big house on the left. Mama, Daddy, Nonc Ulysses and Tante Alice would sit in rockers on the big front porch and *visite.*

A long cement walk extended from the house to the road. Alta, Tom, Agnes, Vivian, T-Paul, Jeanne, and I would lie down on our backs and watch for falling stars. The sky was tremendous and so beautiful. There were no lights any where around. It must have been the time of year when there were meteors. The sky was lit up with falling stars. It was beautiful and yet scary. We were told for luck we had to make the sign of the cross as they were falling. Our ritual kept our hands very busy. I can still feel those serene and beautiful times whenever I look at the night sky.

MISSISSIPPI MAGIC
by
Virginia Cromwell

People are right when they say, "Things aren't what they used to be," but change isn't always bad. Ice cream is an all year every day treat for my grandchildren, but when I was a child we had ice cream only in the summer, and then it was limited to special occasions such as birthdays or the Fourth of July. You see, in the 1930's and early '40's, ice cream was made in a hand-cranked freezer. Because both ice and sugar were expensive and hard to come by, everybody knew exactly which days were going to be ice cream days.

Summer ice cream days were great, but they didn't hold a candle to the special magical wonderland we children fervently hoped we would have during the coming winter. We knew it would snow at least two or three times every winter and there would usually be enough snow on the ground to have a great winter treat that was even better than ice cream--snow cream. We also knew that about every four years our town had a major snow and/or ice storm covering everything in sight for days. While the ice storms were kind of pretty, a snow storm was what we prayed for at the beginning, and all the way through, every winter.

When a snow storm came, the grown-ups worried about adult concerns like damage the weight of the snow on the roof might cause, pipes freezing, the roads being closed, and keeping warm. On the other hand, we children were totally fascinated with the wonderland of snow that had descended on us.

Most grownups knew, or at least claimed they knew, by the smell of the wind and color of the sky, when a big snow storm was coming. When the skies turned a funny kind of grey with a pink tinge or when the moon had a certain kind of ring around it and there was a unique smell in the sharp nippiness of the wind that promised either snow or sleet accompanied by sustained cold weather, the adults turned into weather forecasters and began to try to figure out exactly what was going to happen. We children learned early to pay attention when there was a ring around the moon, when the sky took on that special hue or when the wind smelled a certain way. While we imitated the older folks in sniffing and looking, we waited anxiously for them to solemnly give their verdict about what to expect from the weather.

When the big storms did come, sometimes the heavy snows began early in the morning or during the day, but most often the snow seemed to fall during the night. If there was any possibility a snow storm was coming I was so excited it was really hard for me to go to bed, much less fall asleep. Even though I tried everything I could think of to delay bedtime, it always seemed way too early when I was sent to bed ... and "no excuses!" Unlike most of the time when I really enjoyed feeling the warmth of the flannel sheets and quilts and drifted off to sleep lying very still so my body made a nice warm spot in the bed, the thoughts of a snow storm coming made it almost impossible to lie quietly and close my eyes.

When a snow storm was pending, instead of waiting until after Mother called me two or three times to get up because I didn't want to leave my nice warm bed, I would be awake before she called me even once, jump out of bed in a room that was so cold I had goose bumps on my goose bumps, and run to the window to see if, by any chance, the "magic" had come during the night. Even better, maybe I would see snow still falling like sugar from the skies.

If I was lucky, the whole world had turned white during the night, the snow had slacked off, and the sun was making the world sparkle. Sometimes the sky would still be that rosy grey and it would be snowing really hard or sometimes the sun was shining even though it was snowing hard as if to give the magic that was happening in front of me a warm smile of approval.

When a major snow storm hit, schools were canceled and, because there was never sand available to spread on the roads or sidewalks, there were almost no cars or grown-ups on the streets. Of course, all the businesses were closed, too, and with no school or traffic to worry about we children took over the streets of Oxford.

All of us, toddlers to teenagers, played in the snow together because during our fairly rare big snow storms the older kids were very tolerant of the younger ones. Together we made snow angels, had snowball fights, made snowmen, slipped and slid around in the snow to our heart's content, and in a frenzy of fun careened down the steep hills on makeshift sleds that consisted mostly of pieces of cardboard or thin wood.

What snow thing we did first depended on the consistency of the snow. If, at the beginning, the snow was really dry and powder-like, our snowballs would fall apart as

fast as we made them and if there was too much ice in the snow because it was mixed with sleet, we didn't throw many snowballs because they were rough and could hurt our target. But the fine soft powder-like snow was great for making snow angels and the icier snow was good for holding together snowmen and gave us a fast, if bumpy, ride on our pieces of cardboard or wood.

"Inside" was where we went only when the tone in our parents' voices and what they called us well told us we had better get in *now* (all of us knew it was past time to move in a hurry when our folks stopped calling us by our nicknames, went to our first name, then progressed to our first and second names and culminated by calling us in a no-nonsense tone of voice by our full names), or our fingers and toes were too numb to make more snowballs or stumble back up the hill.

While the air smelled so cold and clean outside, the smell of the hot chocolate and the soup Mother had fixed smelled, in its own way, just as good and quickly reminded my stomach that it was empty. On cue, once I smelled the food my stomach usually started growling. When that happened, Daddy always joked about people who made impolite noises.

Before long, the good smells in the kitchen were overpowered by the unpleasant odor from my wet clothes. The minute I stepped through the door I was expected to take off my wet shoes and socks. Then I was to get out of my wool coat, scarf, mittens and sweater and put all the clothes, as well as my shoes and socks, next to the heater so they could dry out. (They had to be dry enough to pass Mother's eagle eye before she would let me put them back on and go outside to play again, so I put them as close to the heater as I possibly could to hurry the drying process along.) If you have never had the experience, believe me, wet wool *stinks* when it starts drying! Even though it was an unpleasant smell then, today drying wet wool brings back memories of the fun I had as a child enjoying the magic of the few snow storms that came our way.

When Mother *finally* decided my food was digested and the clothes were dry enough, I hastily bundled up again before she could change her mind and went back to a wonderful world where even the trees' bare branches looked elegant with their thick layer of white, where evergreens were the greenest they would be until the next time they were covered by a big blanket of snow, and where the sun reflected off icicles in such a way they looked like crystal throwing off as many colors as a diamond.

Like all good things, at the end of each day fun in our winter wonderland came to an end. Too soon the beautiful white vision became grey and slushy, schools and roads opened again, and it was back to the routine of life in a sleepy Southern town.

There were only a few big snow storms during the time I was growing up in Oxford, but I still treasure the memories of each of them. The big snows were truly a magical adventure to me. Why, I even remember the sore throats and croup that followed each snow storm with affection!

Yes, it's true things aren't what they used to be. Sometimes that is good, but the way things used to be is not always bad. Even now, when I recall the excitement and sense of magic those few big snow storms brought to my life, I still feel the wonder and awe they brought with them. I hope the generations of children coming of age in the 21st century will have something magical, like big snow storms, to remember in their old age, too.

GAW'S STEPS
by
Johnnie Kocurek

I don't know when or why I named her Gaw. I was probably learning to talk and couldn't master the two syllables of Grandma. The name stuck and my grandmother, Mary Young, was known as Gaw for the rest of her life and possibly beyond. On her tombstone, below her proper name and in larger letters, is inscribed GAW. Gaw's love and generosity were always offered in abundance, especially to the children welcomed in her yard. Many times Gaw sat on her front steps, watching children play, and said to all within hearing distance, "I'd rather have children growing in my yard than flowers."

Gaw's house sat on the side of a hill. At the foot of the hill lived Aunt Mary Jane and Uncle John Young. The house on the other side belonged to Uncle Poly Johnson, who, for as long as I can remember, was a very old man. We were his only family. Gaw's house, built on a four foot rock foundation, stood between the other two with a porch wrapping part way around. The front part of the roof peaked and reached to the sky, giving the white frame house a regal look.

The most wonderful part of the structure were its steps. There were six of them, strong and sturdy, probably cut from hardwood trees that grew in the woods nearby. Some of the most important events in the neighborhood were planned or occurred on these steps.

The steps could be seen from most any place on the street. One of the nearest observation points was Uncle John's and Aunt Mary Jane's front porch. They had delegated themselves as "WATCHERS OF THE CHILDREN" for this generation of kids as they had for the generation before. Aunt Jane and Uncle John were very important to all of us in the neighborhood. Not only did Aunt Mary Jane remind Gaw almost every day that "Those kids are ruining your flowers, Mary!!" she also furnished cookies to us when we sat on Gaw's steps. I'm sure that was to trick us to get on the steps and stay off the flowers!!

Uncle John's importance was no less exciting. He was the proud owner of the ONLY radio on the block. One evening a week, as many that could crowd on the

steps, gathered and waited for Uncle John to turn his radio toward an opened window with the volume as loud as possible. Adults and children sat quietly on the steps listening to Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Fireside Chats." Somehow Uncle John's radio made us feel that all was "right with the world."

Billy Harper and Verla Jean were one of the couples that gathered on the steps for our president's talk. Billy Harper's personal life was always an interest to the neighborhood. We lost count as to how many times he had been engaged only to call it off before the wedding. Verla Jean, on the other hand, was an old maid, having reached twenty-four years with no serious beau.

She was sitting on the top step one evening and we noticed Billy Harper sitting next to her, holding her hand. We muffled our giggles but kept a keen eye out for any other antics. Soon after, we saw Billy Harper kiss her and there on the same step a few months later, he proposed to her.

Very shortly after, Verla Jean told us about the new baby she was expecting. She joked, "I might just have this baby on these steps." We kids certainly did not want to miss seeing that event, so we followed her moves very carefully.

Uncle John's grandson, Billy Jack, visited the Youngs each summer. He was fifteen and I was ten when he proved what we had always known about him. Not only was he the oldest and tallest kid in the neighborhood that summer, he was a genius. The first week of vacation, he taught us to make electricity, and he invented the telephone. He also taught us the shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept." "You never know when, in an emergency, you might need a Bible verse," he confidently told us as we sat on the steps.

One particular day, Billy Jack gathered six of us on the steps. He stood before us holding a tangled mess of wire and two tin cans. "How would you like to talk with someone on the hill without yelling?" Our genius had spoken, and sitting on the steps, untangling wire, we made history. Billy Jack made a hole in the bottom of the cans. He attached the pieces of wire together and added a can to each end. We carefully spread and strung wire as he directed, from the steps through the fences, around hedges and on low tree limbs, to the top of the hill and Marie Ann's house. Billy Jack and Marie Ann stayed on top of the hill with the rest of the construction crew and James Medley, Mary Jo, Bob and I were sent back to the headquarters on Gaw's steps . Billy

Jack had well instructed me in telephone usage. I put a can to my mouth and yelled, "Hello, Marie Ann!" then quickly put the can to my ear ... "Ello onnie eee." A miracle!

We kept the can under the step and enjoyed Billy Jack's invention for a full day. Early the next morning, Gaw awakened Mary Jo, Bob and me. "Aunt Mary Jane and Billy Jack are waiting on the steps for you. Get dressed and go out there." We opened the front door and there sat Billy Jack and Aunt Mary Jane and a tangled mess of wire. It took Billy Jack the better part of the day to restring all the neighbor's clothes lines. Baskets with white lumps of wet laundry were brought and set on the steps waiting to be hung to dry. Billy Jack hung the wires and we hung the clothes. The rest of the day was spent on the steps, meditating about our sins. Cookies and reminders never to destroy another's property were furnished by Aunt Mary Jane.

In didn't take long that evening for Genius to come up with another miracle. He merely announced, "I've got it. You'll find out tomorrow."

By dusk the next day, Billy Jack had lined up six fruit jars on the steps. We ran through the yard, jumping and grabbing into the air with Aunt Mary Jane mentioning "flowers" a couple of times. When we had filled the jars with fireflies, we placed them as close together as possible. There on the steps we had another miracle ... electricity! The fireflies made just enough light to make our faces glow as we told ghost stories. Billy Jack had proven himself a genius again.

Uncle Poly was 89 years old the day Billy Jack made the telephone. He had stopped walking over to visit us in the evenings but sat on his porch, yelling back and forth to whoever was sitting on the steps . I wasn't on the steps the day he decided to visit us again. He somehow managed to walk across his yard and halfway through ours. There was no one on the steps that day, but nevertheless, when he reached them, they must have been a welcomed sight to him for he sat down on the first step and died. I like to think he was where he wanted to be. That night as I sat on the first step, all I could think of was "Jesus wept." It was nice to have a Bible verse in an emergency.

James Medley lived around the corner and skated to Gaw's house almost every day. He was always welcomed as the only owner of skate keys around. He stood holding on to the steps as I sat tightening my skates with his key. "Why are your knees so knobby?", he asked as he looked down at my bony knees. His face was in a direct line with my fist. I drew it back and hit him as hard as I could. I saw a little blood on

his nose just as his skates went out from under him and he fell to the ground. I sat firmly on the steps and made no effort to help him get up. It was a while before James Medley could go home. Neither my knees nor his nose were ever mentioned again. He was the first boy I ever hit.

I guess James Medley thought he might redeem himself when a couple of years later, we were sitting on Gaw's steps and he planted my first kiss on my mouth. YUCK!! I hit him again. This time he promptly went home. He certainly had not learned much about insulting me.

Gaw was always sitting on the porch steps each time we arrived for a summer visit. She was always standing on them, waving goodbye each time we left.

James Medley went off to war some place overseas and I sat on the steps many times writing V-mail letters to him.

As with many of my friends, James didn't make it home from World War II. Gaw, Mary Jo, Uncle John, Aunt Mary Jane, Billy Jack and most of the other old neighbors are no longer with us. The wooden steps have given way to concrete ones, and the hiding place under the steps has been closed by concrete and rock. The peaked roof on the house is still reaching to the sky and flowers are blooming all over the yard.

Several of us took one of the steps as our own as concrete replaced wood. The wooden steps were heavy, shiny and smooth as glass from years of wear and there were little nicks from boys' knives cut across the edges. I don't know what happened to all of the steps. They disappeared with a lot of memories. I do know that one of them was made into a mantle and is in Billy Harper's and Verla Jean's daughter's home. If only it could talk. But it can't and all the people still around that found a comfort zone on the steps have left it up to me to write about some of our memories. I have related a few of the roles the steps played in our lives. I say "a few" because I promised years ago NEVER to reveal some of the secrets concerning love, tears, plots and plans (both mine and others) that I know were shared on Gaw's steps.

SUMMER ON THE FARM
by
Chris Westell

After I was required to go to school, I could only spend the summers on the farm. I would start packing weeks before school ended and was ready to visit Busia's and Dzia-dzia's farm the day after school let out.

My summer companion was my cousin Joe who was about eight months older than I. Joe was the youngest of my Uncle Max and Aunt Agnes's children. Max was my mother's brother. Joe had two siblings, Bobbie, the age of my big brother, and a sister, Ann, who was the age of my older sister Monica. Joey lived about one mile from my grandparents' farm. The road between the farms was gravel and very hard to walk on. Sometimes the farmers with wagons would pick us up and take us for a way on the road.

Joey and I were great ones for getting into trouble. What one did not think of, the other one did. Our most daring trick was to take dynamite caps into the woods and set them off after putting junk and wood on top of them. No, we never got burned. I guess our guardian angels were doing extra duty!

One day, after an exhausting period of fooling around on the farm, like helping with the milking or chasing the bull, we went into the living room at Aunt Agnes's house. We took off our big old shoes and were laying around on the couch and chairs. Soon we got into an argument, typical bickering for Joey and I. Before long I picked up one of Joey's shoes and threw it at him. The flying shoe missed Joey and went through the big bay window with stained glass at the top. Joey and I quickly dove behind the couch, still mumbling at one another. The crashing sound brought Uncle Max into the room. One look at the shattered window brought flames to his eyes. His smoking cigar just about dropped from his mouth. "Harriet! Joe! get out here! Who did that?" Joey said, "Harriet threw a shoe at me." I countered with "It was Joey's fault! He ducked!" Near convulsions, Uncle Maxie turned and quickly left the room. We were sure he had gone to get a strap, but much later we learned that he was laughing so hard at my defense that he had to leave the room.

Joey and I spent many hours fishing in the creek fed off of Lake Michigan and at other times would go to the bigger Point Creek. Worms were our bait, and of course, I had to put my own bait on the hooks. We always threw the little buggers back, but kept the big ones. A fight always ensued as to who was going to clean them. All I had to do was start crying, my main defense, and Joe would end up doing the job.

We had our favorite swimming hole and would frequently go skinny dipping on warm days. I remember well the day my femininity caught up with me. I refused to get out of the water until Joey went into the woods. Every time I started to get out of the water and head for my clothes, he would run out of the trees yelling and taunting me. Finally he tired of it and disappeared so I could get out. From then on I always wore my old red swim suit under my clothes, something my Busia was always scolding me for. She wanted me to put on my underwear. So I put the underwear over the suit. I can still see Busia walking out of the room, laughing shaking her head and saying some scolding words.

Joey and I were very good with our homemade sling shots. We made them out of y-shaped tree branches and strips of old inner tubes. We shot at everything, living or not, but our specialty was the blue glass insulators on the electric poles along the gravel roads. We were then entertained by the repairmen having to replace them. We, of course, kept our sling shots out of sight.

THE UNUSUAL JEANETTE ROSS MAY
by
Mae Dorsey

I would imagine that every small town has its one or two families who are emulated and respected by everyone else in the community. Crowley is no exception.

The Crowley Industrial Training School was the only public school for blacks when I was a child. The principal, the Reverend H. C. Ross, was also pastor of the largest black Baptist church in Crowley. His daughter, Jeanette Ross May, taught English, music, and speech. Along with teaching these courses, she was also the school librarian and the girls' basketball coach.

How could she wear so many hats? She performed all of these duties, and she performed them well. Mrs. May exhibited extreme interest in all of the students of C.I.T.S. Every student respected her and never considered disobeying her rules. It isn't strange that a person would have such an impact on the people of the community during the forties--family ties were stronger and people had more respect for one another then.

Three years with Mrs. May afforded me many experiences that have helped me through the years. I promised myself that I would teach English and that I would be the effective classroom manager that Mrs. May was. There was no time for foolishness in her class. Every minute was important and well spent while we were with her. She was most influential in preparing us for life by constantly saying to us, "The world owes you a living, but you must work for it." Yes, she taught us more than grammar, Shakespeare, and composition. She helped to prepare us for life, and how deeply appreciative I am.

Jeanette May was also the minister of music at the church which her father pastored. Because of her influence, the Morning Star Baptist Church maintained the best choirs in the area. It was my pleasure and shared blessing to sing with the children's, the youth, and the adult choirs.

Presently, Mrs. May, who is 92 years old, is a resident in the Christian Villa Nursing Home in Crowley. Recently, as I sat and assisted her in eating a large piece

of sweet potato pie, she threw her head back, stared at me, and emphatically said to me, "Mae, I can see you sitting in my class trying to assist students who needed extra help. Do you remember that?" How well I remember those activities which might have been the beginning of my teaching career, all learned from Mrs. May.

PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMORY: AFTER THE FUNERAL

by

Versie L. Foti

The days of autumn are still very warm in south Louisiana even when the nights have turned cooler than they were during the dog days of summer. October 1935 was a typical fall month--cool nights, heavy dew in the early mornings which burned off as the sun came up over the fields. By noon the temperature had risen to almost summertime heat. Harvest was almost finished. The blooms on the flowering plants had not yet died away and frost had not yet killed the weeds and grass that always grow so profusely in south Louisiana.

I was awakened on that morning, October 15, by the squeaking of the door as it opened into the bedroom where Permelia, Martha, Jean, and I slept in two double beds. I sat up in bed and was suddenly wide awake. An overwhelming sense of grief poured over my body. It began first with my consciousness then flowed downward until every fiber of my body writhed in pain. Gushing tears fell in streams down my face. I wanted to bury my head in the covers and never face this world again.

"Mama is dead! Today is Mama's funeral! I no longer have a Mama!" The thoughts burned in my brain as I looked up at Daddy standing in the doorway holding my youngest sibling, Billy, not yet three years old. Daddy looked so sad, so vulnerable, so tired, as though he had gotten no sleep.

Quietly he said, "Versie, Mrs. Arnold is here to show you how to make biscuits and help you prepare breakfast this morning." Then he gently closed the door to the bedroom, knowing that I would do what needed to be done.

I was the eldest of six children--four girls and two boys. Daddy awakened each one and assigned tasks according to age and ability. My sister, Permelia, nineteen months younger than I, would help the two youngest children, Jean, six, and Billy, get washed and dressed for the day. My other brother, Vira, 11, and my sister, Martha, 9, must dress themselves and help make the beds.

Daddy, dressed in his work clothes, went to the barn to feed and water the livestock and milk the cows. A neighbor from nearby, Mr. Arnold, came to help Daddy with the morning chores while his wife helped me to prepare breakfast.

Silence hung heavily over the house. Almost wordlessly, Mrs. Arnold showed me the measurements for the ingredients that went into the biscuits. Quietly she showed me how to mix the dough in a deep pan. Flour was put into the pan and a well was formed in the middle. Using my hands, I mixed the salt, baking powder, and soda with a little flour, then worked the shortening into the mixture. Gradually, I poured the clabber into the well while working the dry ingredients until the dough was the right consistency for pinching off a hunk to shape the biscuits and place them in the baking pan.

As I worked, the tears gently rolled down my cheeks. Occasionally a deep sob would wrack my shoulders and roll slowly down into my gut area. Still, I tried to control my grief.

I could hear my sisters and brothers quietly sobbing as they went about their tasks. There was no conversation among them, no teasing or bantering as usually occurred on mornings less sad.

Daddy brought in the milk, strained it into crocks, and set the crocks in the icebox to cool. Then he called the children to the table for breakfast. As each one came in, he took his usual seat. Mr. and Mrs. Arnold joined us. Daddy took his chair at the head of the table. Mama's chair sat empty.

Slowly the hot biscuits were passed from one to another. Mechanically, each one took a biscuit and buttered it. The pitcher of syrup was passed. Some poured a little syrup into their plates; others did not. Some sipped a little milk and asked to be excused from the table. No one was hungry. No one could eat.

Mrs. Arnold and I put the food away, cleared the table, and washed the dishes. My lesson in preparing breakfast was complete. I would prepare breakfast every day, as well as dinner and supper, for the next three years.

Daddy and I changed from our work clothes into our "good clothes." We climbed into our 1932 Ford V-8 for the mile and a half ride to Grandma's house where

Mama's body had been brought to await the funeral. As we drove up, we could see crowds of people gathered in the yard and on the front porch. Small cousins were there, expending energy by playing tag among the cars parked in the barn lot. Male relatives and friends were gathered in small groups, making small talk to pass the time.

Solemnly, Daddy helped the children from the car, then took Billy and Jean by the hand and walked toward the house. The rest of us followed them, each buried in his own thoughts. Grandma was sitting just inside the door to the living room. Each of us went over and kissed her. Aunts and women neighbors were gathered there and in the dining room.

Slowly we walked toward the open coffin where we stood huddled together, not knowing what else to do. People came to us, some hugging and kissing us, all offering sympathy and help. Gradually the four youngest children were led away to a place where they could talk and play with other children. For a time, they could forget where they were and why. Finally Daddy slipped away.

I felt so alone among so many people. I wondered why Mama had died and left such an emptiness in the lives of so many. I was scared of a future without Mama. I had already been introduced to the responsibility of preparing meals for a large family. I remembered Mama as always being so busy, so much to do. Could I do it all? My sisters and brothers seemed so young. Billy was still a baby.

My head was spinning. I felt that it was all a dream. Surely, I would awaken and life would continue as it had been. Then the reality would engulf me, and I was again overcome with grief. I missed Mama so much already. I didn't want to go home without her.

Finally, it was time to leave for the funeral at Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church. The hearse arrived and the coffin was gently placed into it. The cars were lined up and the procession traveled a mile to the church on a narrow dirt road. Mama's sister, Aunt Maggie, rode in the car with us following immediately behind the hearse.

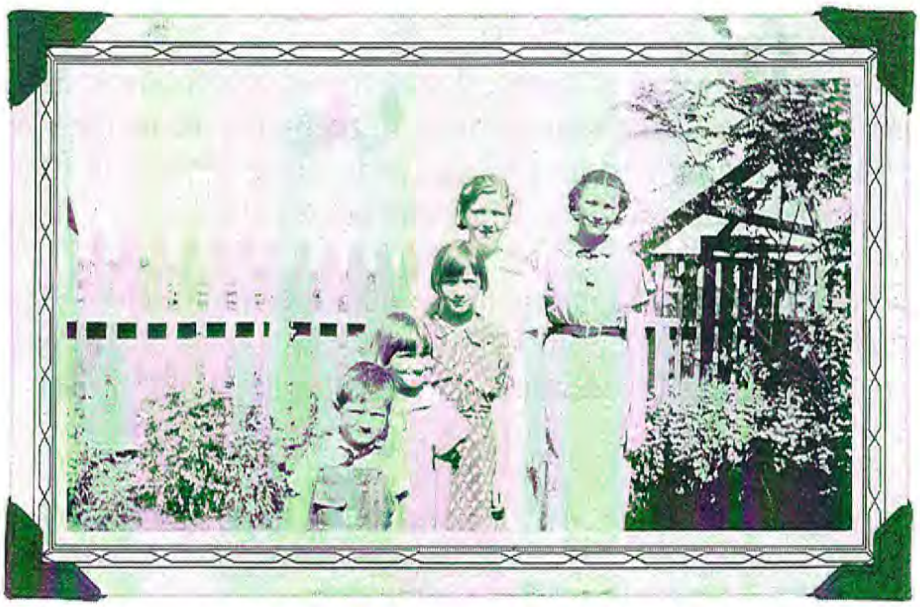
A choir sang several of Mama's favorite hymns: "Just A Closer Walk With Thee," "In The Garden," and "The Old Rugged Cross." A eulogy was read by a good friend and neighbor, Mrs. T. G. McClelland. The Reverend M. E. Williamson, then pastor of First Baptist Church in Eunice and a long time friend, performed the final

services. I was so lost in grief that the whole ceremony was a blur as were the final words at the cemetery.

Afterwards, the immediate family returned to Grandma's house where food had been prepared and brought by friends and neighbors who lived in the community. Late in the afternoon, families who lived some distance away said "goodbye" and left for their homes.

Aunt Essie was Mama's older sister who lived near Grandma's. She came out onto the back porch where we children had gathered. A camera was in her hand. She asked if we would stand together so that she could take a picture. My brother, Vira, refused. Even though we had changed our "good clothes," five of us stood for a picture in front of the picket fence in my Grandma's yard.

A long day, one of the saddest in my life, was finally coming to an end. Tomorrow would surely be better. Tomorrow would be my fifteenth birthday!



The Laughlin Family, left to right: Bill, Jean, Martha, Permilia, and Versie

MY INNISFREE
by
Virginia Cook

❖ ❖ ❖

The Lake Isle of Innisfree

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made.
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore,
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey.
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

--William Butler Yeats

❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖

When I first read William Butler Yeat's poem, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," in my English 102 class, these words stirred a longing in my heart to go back to the place of my childhood where I had a place of simplicity, the quiet beauty of my father's garden, the noises of the country insects at evening, and freedom from the horrors of the world as I now know it. I long, as Yeats did, for the simple things to comfort me.

I can see in my imagination my father's garden where he had at least nine bean rows. I recall crawling along the tunnels made by the bean poles that sloped upwards to be tied together at a wire stretched between large poles. At the time potatoes were ready to be dug, I was allowed to dig with my little shovel. I could pick the ripe tomatoes and cut off the yellow squash. Working alone, I felt the significance of doing my share of helping my father with his work. I felt needed.

Mother's part of the garden was her creation of beauty. She always had zinnias, cosmos, and sweet peas. She supplied sweetpeas for the Clarksdale High's graduating girls' nosegays--over fifty of them. I felt important as a grade school girl watching the older high school girls in white dresses with sweet peas I had picked.

Evenings at my home were times when Mother, Father, brother Joe, and I sat on a long screened porch. When Joe and I felt friendly with each other, we went out to catch June bugs. We would tie strings on their legs to control their flights. We listened to tree frogs and katydids and chased the lightning bugs that sparkled around the yard.

There is no lake near where I lived, but I can imagine one. Nothing is more peaceful than the sound of lapping water. I can add the lake to my childhood memories, the lake as Yeats described the lake at Innisfree.

Deep in my heart is a desire sometimes to return to youth and to the place where today's world cannot intrude. My Innisfree has no television, no computers, no wars, no problems of corruption, or of injustice. When Yeats wrote this poem in 1892, surely he longed for the simplicity and peace I long for.

BURIAL AT SEA
by
J.M. Jennings Jr.

By the middle of March 1944, the repairs to the destroyer USS King (DD242) had been completed and the DD242 assigned temporary duty in the eastern Pacific, berthed at Treasure Island, San Francisco.

We conducted air-sea rescue operations together with shepherding fleet submarines during the sea trials after their commissioning at Mare Island Naval Shipyard or the completion of repairs at Hunter's Point Drydock.

During these sea trials and submarine tests, the King guarded the subs against air attack by the crews of overly aggressive United States coastal patrol airplanes or blimps. The "boats" conducted dives to their designed depths to determine the integrity of their hulls and the efficiency of their underwater propulsion equipment. Some days we played "cat and mouse" games so the subs could evaluate their ability to evade the hunter-destroyer "cats." We were also there to scream for help if "our" sub couldn't or didn't resurface at the agreed time. If that happened, we would have thrown out buoys to mark the location so a submarine rescue ship would have a chance to locate the sub and save the crew.

We prepared to get underway the morning of March 14, 1944, for another submarine test series plus a different job we were all curious about, something none of us had ever helped with before--a burial at sea.

At 9:25 AM, each of the crew not on watch mustered on deck as an honor guard to the remains of a hero whose last wish had been to have his ashes "scattered on the bosom of the sea."

At 9:33 AM, we received the burial party on board . First was a Marine Lieutenant, limping and aided by a cane, followed by a Marine bugler and six enlisted Marines carrying bolt-action Springfield rifles. Last was a Navy Chaplain lugging a small leather case. Later, we learned the case held a bronze urn containing the ashes of Captain Culp, USN. Each Marine wore his formal dress uniform with his Maltese

Cross shaped "Marksmanship" badge pinned on his blue uniform coat. I was reminded of that old boast, "I am a Marine, a rifleman first and always!"

Lt. Pond, our Commanding Officer, escorted these nine people down to the ward room, their quarters for the voyage to and from Operating Area H-7 where the burial would take place . The purpose of the clean, empty buckets in the ward room was explained to our nine passengers, for often the first voyage for a person not used to the gyrations of a small ship at sea brought on an attack of "mal-de-mer," sea sickness--embarrassing to the sick person and a mess to clean-up unless a bucket was handy and used.

The King got underway at 9:57 AM, passed through the anti-submarine/anti-torpedo nets and headed westward to Area H-7, our course 192 degrees true, making 20 knots.

At 11:35 AM, the King hove-to, twin propellers turning over only fast enough to maintain steerage-way, to keep our bow headed into the large swells rolling in from the northwest. The King pitched up and down, but so silently. The creak of the ship, the sound of the wavelets slapping the hull, and the drone of the engines of a patrolling blimp circling overhead were the only sounds.

Our Chief Boatswain's Mate had directed the erection of an inclined burial slide over the port side of the ship. The "Padre" put the urn of ashes on the slide which the Boatswain then covered with an American Flag. The six Marines lined up fore and aft on the inboard side of the slide with the cane-carrying Lieutenant on their right. While the bugler positioned himself near the railing, the ship's crew came to attention. The Chaplain's remarks were brief, he had trouble keeping his balance, and the riflemen fired several volleys in the air. Every thing was so quiet. Empty brass shell casings clinked as they landed on the steel deck and then rolled to the scuppers, openings along the edge of the deck so water could drain down into the sea. Finally, the bugler blew taps, the Boatswain's Mate raised the inboard end of the slide, and the urn slid slowly to the outer edge, then dropped into the ocean. The burial ended quietly, Captain Culp's wishes had been met.

The King's log shows the burial ceremony took only ten minutes, but it was the most impressive burial I have ever witnessed.

At 11:45 AM, we got under way and proceeded further into Area H-7 to conduct underwater sound training exercises for several hours with the submarine USS Sawfish (SS276), USCG Daphine, PC 815 and SC1367.

I was the OOD (Officer of the Deck) as we returned under San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge and tied up to the pier at Treasure Island the same evening. After our nine guests disembarked, I still had the "watch." When I made my first round of inspection, I passed through the ward room, and my nose told me that none of the clean buckets in the wardroom had been dirtied!

THE JUNIOR PROM
by
Jo-an Ralston

When the redbuds burst forth with purple-red blooms, Junior Prom is just around the corner. Gilbert the mailman's ego suddenly shoots up ten points until he realizes that all the young girls are not admiring his new sideburns which he has been nurturing for weeks, but are awaiting the spring and summer issue of Sears and Roebuck catalogue.

At last it arrives. Now, how do I keep it from the rest of the family until I have savored every page--from the shiny cover with the smiling lady wearing a flowering pink dress to the farm tools which Daddy covets but would never own?

Soon enough it is time to quit dreaming. Mom will somehow scrape up enough money just as she's done with my three older sisters to purchase the perfect prom dress. After many days of pondering and worrying, we decide on a pale lavender, strapless dress, fitting snug at the waist with rows of net ruffles cascading to ankle length. I envision the delight in my date's eyes--if I can find one. It is hard to find a father who would allow his son to drive ten miles into the country after night fall.

Finally prom night has arrived. I even have a beau. And he has his own car, paid for by waking at three o'clock in the morning to milk twenty head of milk cows by hand before going to school, then returning home in the afternoon to plow the fields. His name is Jim.

Water must be heated in the tea kettle after being pumped from the cistern through a pitcher pump. My next step is to find a willing sister to pour cup after cup of water over my hair to make sure all the soap is rinsed away.

Then there is a frantic search for bobby pins. They are found hiding around the edges of drawers where the last careless sister had thrown them to clear off the top of the dresser. Each tiny pincurl is placed lovingly in neat rows by first grabbing a small piece of hair, stretching it out, placing the index finger in a pointing position with the tip touching the scalp then wrapping it around and around. The trick is to slide it off the finger and secure it with two bobby pins crisscrossed. The sliding is made easier

because I have to first apply slimy waving lotion dipped from the bottle with a comb. Hours of drying time are required for a frizz-free hairdo.

Closer to the time when my date would arrive, water is again heated for the galvanized wash tub. Because I am "Queen for the Day," as my siblings have dubbed me, I get first use of the water. Living with a family of ten, I sometimes climbed into the tub of tepid water with nondetergent soap scum floating at the top--that's if I were fifth. If I were tenth, the water would be cold.

Next comes the strapless bra (it would fall down all night), then the Playtex girdle, after being pulled over a flat stomach. Four dangling snaps hold up my first pair of nylons. Each seam wiggling up the back of my skinny legs must be perfectly straight. As the lavender dress is pulled over my head and the zipper firmly closed, tears gather in Mom's eyes. Her last little girl has grown up.

Jim must have thought he stumbled into an orphanage with all my brothers and sisters. They want to see what kind of nut would take their pesky sister on a date, let alone to the prom. He places a lovely orchid corsage on my right wrist, and I really do feel like Queen for a Day.

Ten miles is a long way to travel with someone you barely know. Secret glances reveal a skinny boy with dark slicked down hair, blue eyes staring straight ahead trying to avoid the pot holes in the road. A bulging adam's apple is encircled by a stiff white collar. A not too neatly knotted tie dangles down the front of his shirt.

After what seems hours, we arrive at St. Elmo High School. Trying not to make contact with bare skin, Jim helps me out of the car. The gym has been transformed into Paris, or what teenagers from a small midwest town imagine the cosmopolitan city looks like. A large arch with crepe paper flowers, the Arc de Triomph, awaits our entry. Streamers cut and placed on the basketball goals by the "town kids" wave gently in the breeze which enters through the open double doors.

We are seated at long tables and served by nervous sophomores--our first experience at dining out. After the meal, all the tables are cleared and removed. Chairs are placed around small tables in the "French cafe." Lights are dimmed. Jim coaxes me onto the gym floor, by now sprinkled with corn meal--my first dance.

The next year after my graduation, Jim and I were married in a small country church. Our marriage endured happy times and unhappy times for thirty-five years. Eight years ago Jim was laid to rest behind the country church where we were married next to the blooming redbud trees.

UNCLE POLO'S CAMP AT BAYOU BENOIT
by
Doris Bentley

One of our favorite outings for my family after we came back to New Iberia was to spend the day at Uncle Polo's Camp at Bayou Benoit. "Polo" was the nickname of one of Daddy's younger brothers, whose real name was Paul.

When I was a small child, before he had children of his own, Uncle Polo would pick me up in his car and take me with him wherever he was going. I felt a strong bond with this great big man with the soft smiling face and the sparkling eyes. Polo had been in the Navy during World War I. He had married Nita Bonin, "Aunt Neet," and they had two children, Vernon and Elton, nicknamed "Potsy."

During the Depression in the 1930's, Uncle Polo was unemployed. He heard that there were jobs in the Houma area. He went to a job site and asked for a job. It was probably with an oil company because the oil industry was just beginning about that time.

"Can you weld?" the foreman asked.

"Sure," answered Uncle Polo.

"I had never welded in my life," he told me, "But I picked up a welding iron and messed up real good. I learned to weld in a hurry and kept the job."

With the coming of the oil industry into this area of Louisiana, Paul returned to Loreauville and then settled his family in St. Martinville. He opened a machine shop there repairing and making machinery. His two sons, Vernon and Potsy, joined him, and they began making sugar-cane-cutting machinery. Before that, sugar cane was cut by hand. Not only did Uncle Polo's shop sell the machinery throughout the sugar cane-producing area in Louisiana, Texas, and Florida, but they began exporting to the Latin American countries where sugar cane was grown--Haiti, Cuba, and eventually into Central and South America. By 1953 Uncle Polo had retired and turned the business over to his sons, Vernon and Potsy.

Uncle Polo had bought property on Bayou Benoit and put an old school bus, which he converted into a camp, on the place. He tended a garden, where he grew corn, tomatoes, green peppers--whatever. He kept a little horse for the children to ride. And, of course, there were the usual farm animals--chickens, ducks, perhaps guineas--which the children chased until they heard Uncle Polo's big voice, "That's enough!" One might say that you just can't get farming out of a man who grew up on a farm. He just had to have a little piece of land on which to grow things.

We always knew when Daddy had been invited to Uncle Polo's. He would disappear from the house after morning coffee and when he reappeared, there were bags of groceries on the kitchen table. Granddaddy and Uncle Polo were going to cook at the camp. There was great excitement when Uncle Polo invited us to join them. We knew his grandchildren, Kenny and Gerri, would be there also and all of the children would have fun. The children enjoyed riding the horse and exploring the surrounding woods and the bayou bank. That was the fun of it.

One year Daddy took some cement and built a patio for Uncle Polo's camp. Mama, of course, fussed about it. But Daddy said, "It's a lot cheaper for me to build a patio for his camp so that I can feel good about accepting his hospitality than for me to have to build my own camp. It's more convenient, too, because I don't have to keep it up."

You might think that Daddy was imposing on his brother. But I'm sure there had been a lot of discussion and agreement between the two of them, who were in their late 60's. Besides, there was never any doubt that it was Uncle Polo's camp. And nobody went there unless invited.

On one occasion we were all at Uncle Polo's and he had invited his sisters, Aunt Connie, Aunt Tee, and Tante Tacia, for the day. Mama could never join us because she was by then working on the school census as Visiting Teacher for the parish. Each aunt had brought something to add to the feast. It was reminiscent of the Sundays at Vieux Mom's when we were children and everybody contributed to the dinner. All of the sisters, as you know, were very good cooks. Aunt Tee had brought a cake. I knew that she still made her cakes from "scratch." None of these new cake mixes for her!

So I said, "Gee, Aunt Tee, this cake is simply delicious! Which cake mix did you use?"

One of her sisters indignantly answered, "Surely, Doris, you don't think Aunt Tee uses cake mix, do you?"

I smiled. Of course I knew that; I just couldn't resist teasing her.

The get-togethers at Uncle Polo's camp at Bayou Benoit were always full of family oral history, laughter, and warm and loving conversation. The children played around the camp area and explored the surroundings. Perhaps George, Jr., will write his version some day. I don't know how much Bruce remembers. Experiences like that help families to bond and add richness to childhood remembrances.

A PERSONAL INFLUENTIAL PERSON
by
Curney Dronet

My father was the oldest of eight children, born into a farm family with a father and mother who had never attended school. Life was very difficult, and every member of the family was required to work the fields, especially during the harvest season. the women usually prepared the meals, would spin their yarn, and work the loom to sew the clothes of the children. In the late afternoon they would prepare the stalls for the mules, milk the cows, and feed the chicken and the hogs. The men were never in until dusk. Rainy days and Sundays were always welcome days for the children.

My father, Joe, did attend two or three years of school, but as the family grew, it was necessary to hitch a second pair of mules. School, apparently, had never been important to my father, so he was ready for the work routine early in life. Joe was very industrious, and apparently early in his life, he would take a second and third job when the fields at home permitted his absence.

My father and mother were married in 1921, when he was twenty and my mother, Eula, was fifteen. They were farmers, of course, but when I was born, Eula worked as a maid with a midwestern family that had come to Louisiana as homesteaders. They were the ones who suggested to my mother that my given name be Curney, but really spelled with *Kea* instead of the *Cu;* however, the old French priest spelled it the way it sounded upon Baptism. I was brought into the world by a midwife. I feel sure that if a physician had attended my mother, my name might have been spelled the way the midwesterners spelled it.

I felt my father's influence early in my life. He was stern, a disciplinarian, extremely ambitious, and talented. Throughout my life he instilled that same desire in me to excel. He was stern but fair, expecting strict compliance with my assigned chores. He was an enterprising man, working ten hours a day at his craft, carpentry, but always opened to new challenges. When the old Bijou dance place was converted to a theater, he built a dance hall down the street from our home. Incidentally, no liquor, only sodas, cooled down with block ice in a wooden trough behind the counter, were sold. The hall provided a ladies room with beds to rest the young babies who would tire after a few hours. Youngsters my age, 10, 11, 12 years and older, would

attend, but of course, always with chaperones or parents. On one of those Saturday nights I met the future Mrs. Dronet. I'd be remiss if I did not mention the gumbo served after the dance, and as I recall, sold for 15 or 20 cents a plate. Those were the days.

House moving was a good business during the thirties. The moving was on rollers which were the remaining round 8-inch core, more or less, that was left after the boards were cut to size. My dad bought equipment from a mover going out of business, and we were in business. I was in my early teens at the time, yet he paid me $1.50 a day, good wages in the middle thirties. I bought and paid $25 for my first car at the age of fourteen. It was a used model T Ford sedan. I was in sports during my high school days, but I continued to work the moving rig throughout and after the war as well.

I graduated from Erath High in 1940 as valedictorian of my class. I could have attended any school of my choice, but chose S.L.I. in summer and then decided to enter Spencer Business College and received a diploma in the spring of 1941. Irene and I were married on July 6, 1941, and immediately I went to work in construction with my father. We did some contracting until 1943 when I entered the Army Air Corps. I had a desire to fly, and fly I did.

As my training progressed as an aviation cadet, I had several changes of station. Irene and Phyllis, nine months old at the time, followed me to each station, and in one move to Buffalo, N. Y., they met me several weeks later after accommodations had been found. My Dad insisted on escorting her all the way to Buffalo. Money was tight, and Dad provided the money for all our expenses so we could be together. When the war ended, I was released from active duty in October 1945. I went to work again with him in construction. I was fortunate to have saved some money, and in 1946, my Dad built our first home. With the money I had saved, that which I had earned since my separation from the Army and certainly with help from my father and mother, I did not borrow one nickel.

In 1947 Dad and I built the building that was to be Dronet's Department Store. My father's money paid for the store and provided the seed money that I needed to begin a new business. We were partners, of course, but what a beginning for me in a new venture. My father has always been there, but always in the background. I was very headstrong, and he permitted me to lead. Together we were successful.

During the formative years in business, Dad was still doing carpentry work. I managed the department store and acquired a furniture store. I was involved with the National Guard and spent a significant amount of time away from business. I was in land development as well, and yes, the seed money for that came with the help of my father. Dad never involved himself with the management of business. He was limited because of his education level but was always there if a problem developed. He would repair, renovate, and in the two furniture stores, did completely remodel the buildings and never accepted payment. By this time, in the late 60's, he was retired and I had extended myself into residential construction. Yes, he supervised my jobs, not actively but always behind the scenes. As each of my children married, he built, literally, their first home, and in one instance, a second home for my oldest son. He did carpentry for the family until age 82. Dad died at 86. Yes, he has been missed, but he will never be forgotten.