

## CHAPTER I - MY PARENTS



Luke and Lou Sterling

### A FEW WORDS ABOUT MY FATHER

My father, Luther Eurvin Sterling, was born May 4, 1911 on a farm between Calhoun and Shady Point, Oklahoma. Shady Point is just three miles south of Panama. He was Mama and Papa Sterling's oldest and most dependable son. Mama Sterling was Matilda Ann "Tillie" Seigrist (4 Jun 1892 – 18 Sep 1964) and Papa Sterling was William Jefferson Sterling (16 Dec 1882 – 24 Apr 1964). My Dad and his three brothers, Clyde, Charley, and Harry, were usually referred to as "the boys." Their little sister, my Aunt Hazel, was raised as the family princess.

When my grandfather, Will Sterling was about 24 years old and his step sister Iva Elwood was about 16 years old, Mary Effie, Iva's mother caught Will and Iva having sex. This passionate session of love making left Iva pregnant. Mary Effie decided that Will and Iva would have to get married so that the baby would have a name. Mary Effie loaded them into a wagon and took them to Texas, where they got married. Iva had a little girl and named her Ruthie. Iva divorced Will because he was running around on her. Will had become infatuated with another woman, who lived in Shady Point, Oklahoma. Iva said that Will had received a letter from this woman that was highly improper. The court gave custody of Ruthie to Iva. I can not recall ever hearing my father speak of his half sister, Ruthie



Tillie Sterling and sons, Luther and Clyde

The Sterling boys were all good workers who loved to party. In today's world they would be called functional alcoholics. Their drink of preference was straight whiskey, right out of the bottle. They proudly called themselves "Fifth-a-day men", meaning that each of them drank at

least a fifth of a gallon of whiskey every day. Two of Dad's brothers drank themselves to death. Dad and his brother, Harry, manage to wean themselves from alcohol before it was too late. They both lived to be 80 years old.

My father loved a bargain and good country cooking almost as much as he loved his whiskey. When he was young and single he found himself in a small town restaurant in eastern Oklahoma. He was hitchhiking from Panama to another small town so that he could watch his younger brother, Harry, play football. The trip took several hours and left my dad a very hungry man. Not one to suffer hunger pains for long, he entered a nice little country café and ordered the house special. He hungrily ate his meal. When asked how it was, he said that it was delicious and asked the waitress to bring him another serving. One of the other customers, upon seeing my father consuming two consecutive meals, jokingly remarked, "If you can eat one more of those, I'll pay for all three." My dad was about to pop but ever mindful of the value of a dollar, somehow managed to down the third meal. The man, amazed at my father's performance in gluttony happily held up his end of the bargain.

My father and his folks were living in Panama when he first met my mother. My mother was a tall, attractive 17 year old country girl and Dad was a handsome, experienced, not quiet divorced, man of the world. A year earlier he had met and married a woman named Esther Hebert. This marriage was short lived because Esther met and ran off with one of my dad's uncles. Mama and Daddy were married as soon as the divorce became final. Esther went on to marry my dad's Uncle Walter Seigrist, the one she ran off with. Her marriage to Walter was annulled after she found out that Walter was still married to his previous wife. Rumor has it that Esther later ended it all by committing suicide. It is said that she jumped out of a window of a high rise hotel.

#### MY DAD'S FRUGALITY

My dad had a tendency to be very generous whenever he was drinking. When he was sober he was very frugal, but he really didn't enjoy having the reputation. Actually what he resented was the label "tightwad." I called him that once and it so angered him that he refused to talk to me for a very long time. I don't actually remember my calling him tightwad but I'm sure it happened. I'm also sure it was in fun for I would have never said a thing like that except in jest. His avoidance of my phone calls eventually became so obvious that I could no longer ignore them, so I asked Mom if she knew why Dad was shunning me. After Mom told me what was bothering him, I apologized profusely. He accepted my apology, and things were ok between us for awhile after that.

#### MY DAD'S STUBBORNESS

Dad was also known for his stubbornness. He would take a dream to the grave before he would give up on it. One very big dream he had was to own a brand new Cadillac. Not just any Cadillac, mind you, he wanted the best. He wanted to "big shot" it up to the Cadillac dealer, break out a roll of Benjamin Franklins' and peel them off one at a time as he counted enough to pay cash for this prestigious prize. Well sir, there was one dream killer that my dad never counted on. This dream killer's name was Jelly Jones. Old Jelly was the Cadillac dealer in Texas City, Texas, where we lived at the time. Dad had been to old Jelly's car lot dozens of time. He had done a lot of price talking and had finally narrowed his choice down to the perfect

Cadillac. He could just see Old Jelly's jaw drop in awe as he peeled off those crisp hundred dollar bills. It would be a moment to remember for the rest of his days.

After scrimping and saving for years, Dad's big day finally arrived. In eager anticipation, he arose earlier than necessary that fateful morning. Time seemed to stand still. Under his breath, he fussed to himself about the inconvenience of banker's hours. Why couldn't banks open earlier? Waiting for the bank to open seemed an eternity. The time passed however as it always does and Dad got his roll of fresh crisp bills. He was now set for the perfect moment. Off to Old Jelly's he went.

When Dad arrived at Jelly Jones' Cadillac dealership, he quickly spotted Old Jelly and a couple of dubious customers standing by a beautiful black Cadillac. Dad quickly sized up these customers as being a waste of time for Old Jelly. Old Jelly should know better. After all, Dad was an important man. Dad had money. Dad had a big roll of hundred dollar bills. Unable to stand it anymore, Dad stepped up to the trio and managed to interrupt with a timid "Excuse Me, Jelly." Old Jelly responded to this with a "Just a minute, Mr. Sterling. I'm busy with these customers." This infuriated my dad. After all, he had cash money and those other so-called customers were little more than vagrants.

Dad sputtered and fumed for a moment as rage enveloped him. How dare Old Jelly put him off like that and ruin his perfect moment! Dad stomped out, went directly to the Pontiac dealership down the street and bought a brand new Pontiac. He then drove his new Pontiac around and around the block to show Old Jelly that he had lost a serious and important customer. It was a victory of sorts but a sad one. My poor dad went to his grave, never having owned the Cadillac of his dreams.

## MOM AND DAD DISCOVER BOWLING

Mom and Dad weren't in Galveston very long before they discovered bowling. They both had a natural talent for the game and fell in love with the sport. At the bowling alleys they could relax, have a few beers and enjoy new found friends. It wasn't long before they were invited to bowl in a weekly league. This was right up Mama's alley but Dad had to decline. He already had a heavy work schedule at the shipyards and didn't want another scheduled obligation. Dad continued to bowl "now and then" whereas Mama bowled on a regular schedule. With increased practice, Mama continued to get better. It wasn't long before she began outscoring Dad on a regular basis. For Dad, these repeated defeats must have been humiliating. He gave up the game and settled in as Mama's biggest fan.

One major problem with bowling was the temptation and availability of beer. Mom and Dad both loved beer and could keep up with the best of them. Since Dad was a spectator and not a bowler, he had nothing to do but drink and watch Mama bowl. Mama spent less time drinking and more time concentrating on her game.

Working long hours at the shipyard followed by a couple of hours of hard drinking at the bowling alley was often just a little more than Dad could handle. Every once in a while he would excuse himself from the bowling crowd, grab a taxi and go home for some much needed rest. Once, when he was a little drunker than usual, the taxi cab he hailed turned out to be a police car. Dad, not realizing that he had made a mistake, ordered the police officer to take him home. The police officer took Dad home, rather than jail. The policeman then went back to the bowling alley and reported his kind act to my mother.

Dad told me of another episode involving a taxi that almost shocked him sober. He said that after taking a taxi home one night, he found himself too drunk to walk from the curb to our apartment, so he decided to crawl instead. At that time we were living in an apartment complex called the Oleander Addition. Except for the house numbers, all of the apartments looked pretty much the same. Dad, unfortunately, crawled into a neighbor's apartment instead of his own. He crawled all the way into the bedroom only to discover that he had made a horrible mistake. He then backed out of his neighbors' apartment and managed to find his own.

Mama became recognized as one of the top women bowlers in the State of Texas. At the height of her bowling career, she bowled five nights a week in official sanctioned league play and more often than not she bowled the other two nights, just for the fun of it. Mama was having the time of her life but Dad was miserable. Everything was wonderful for Mama except that she hated living in the Oleander homes. She yearned for a house in the suburbs. Daddy made Mama an offer. If she would give up bowling, he would buy her a house. Mama took him up on his offer and quit bowling. Daddy bought her a house in nearby Texas City.

### A FEW MORE WORDS ABOUT MY MOTHER



Emma Lou and Frank Ragains

My mother's maiden name was Emma Louise Ragains. She was born July 5, 1913 in Carpenter, Oklahoma but was raised in Bokoshe, only a few miles west of Panama. To her Panama was tolerable but Bokoshe was much better. I never got to know Mama's beloved Bokoshe, except in some of the wonderful stories she told.

In one of her stories, she confided in me that my older brother, William Frank Sterling, born April 20, 1931, was not his legal name at all. She said that the name he was born with was Billy Frank. She said that everyone thought that he was named William after his grandfather Sterling and Frank after his grandfather Ragains, but they were all wrong. She said that Bill was named Billy because Billie had been her nickname when she was a little girl. She said that Bill was named after her and her Daddy and not after his two grandfathers.

Mama said that when Grandpa and Grandma Ragains first got married, in 1900; Papa wanted a son more than anything else. Aunt Elizabeth and Aunt Katherine were their first and second born. Even though he loved them with all his heart, neither of them was a son. The next born was my mother, Emma Louise, obviously not the much longed-for son.

In many ways Grandpa was like the rock of Gibraltar, but now with three daughters, Grandpa could stand it no longer. To the whole world Mama was a sweet darling beautiful little girl but to Grandpa, she was “Billie,” his much yearned-for son.

Grandpa Ragains stopped calling Mama “Billie” when my Uncle Frank was born when Mama was almost five. Now, at last, Grandpa had a real son and Mama was free to develop into the beautiful, wonderful lady who later became my mother.

Aunt Elizabeth settled into the role of First Lady with Aunt Katherine being both her charge and her assistant. My mom, or “Billie” as she was known, was free to be Grandpa’s little boy, a tag along sister, or whatever role that might fit her fancy. Aunt Katherine was large, big boned and cumbersome, and Mama was born a gifted and natural athlete. She could run like a gazelle and scamper up a tree like as squirrel fleeing for its life. Katherine being older, larger and stouter, could easily overpower her little sister – if she could only catch her.

Sibling rivalry reared its ugly head one day between the two with fleet footed “Billie” chasing her big sister around the house with a razor sharp butcher knife. Katherine was having a hard time seeing the humor in this and was running for her life. After several laps around the house, Katherine spied Grandpa’s chopping axe. She quickly grabbed up the axe, wheeled around and announced to my mother, “Now, damn your hide, I’ll kill you!” At that moment, “Billie” joined Katherine in not seeing the humor in the situation. She threw down the knife and started running for her life. She managed to scamper up and found safety in the big oak tree next to the house.

Katherine, not much of a tree climber, ordered Mama to come down. Mama feeling rather secure in her lofty perch, decided to stay put. Katherine then decided to chop the tree down but changed her mind after a couple of swings. Katherine patrolled the base of the tree, trying to coax Mama down until Grandma returned home from visiting neighbors. Mama and Katherine, both having a healthy respect for “peach tree tea” assumed the role of perfect angels. “Peach tree tea” was a family term that meant a whipping with a switch cut from a peach tree.

On another occasion Mama and Katherine got into a fight over dirty dishes. Mama figured that the only work that she had to do was “boy work.” Katherine didn’t see it quite that way. Grandma Ragains had left the girls alone, while she was visiting a neighbor, and left Katherine in charge. Being left in charge went to Katherine’s head and she decided she would bully her little sister into doing the dishes. Mama resenting the assignment, and instead of washing the dishes she put them away without washing them. When Katherine discovered this, she decided to whip Mama. The attempted whipping wound up in a knock-down-drag-out fight with Mama being pinned to the floor while Katherine sat on top of her. Katherine revealed the hot temper that she was known for and started choking Mama. Fearing for her life, Mama went limp, feigning death. Katherine, thinking that she had killed Mama, became remorseful and started pleading for Mama to come back to life. Even though she was promised the moon, Mama wasn’t about to come back to life until she heard Grandma Ragains returning from the neighbors. As soon as they heard Grandma’s footsteps on the porch, Mama and Katherine became loving sisters again.

## MAMA AND DADDY GET MARRIED

My Grandpa Ragains built a little house near his farm on Bokoshe Mountain and gave it to my parents as a wedding present. Living near Grandma and Grandpa Ragains was wonderful for Mama, but Daddy wasn't happy being away from his kinfolks and their rowdy lifestyle. Daddy's people were mostly heavy drinking, womanizing musicians. His mother's folks, the Seigrist's, were almost all accomplished musicians. They played gigs throughout the region along the Arkansas River. I'm told that Daddy played a mean piano back in those days and he even formed a small band and went on the road for awhile. Mama knew of Daddy's fondness for the ladies so she insisted on coming along, just to keep him honest. Daddy wasn't real particular where they spent the night, but Mama was. Mama received the shock of her life when she discovered that the rooming house, where they spent the night was not a rooming house at all. It was a whore house. For Mama, that was the last straw. She demanded that Daddy give up his musical career and find "respectable" work.

## BILL WAS BORN AND THEN CAME ME



Lou and Bill Sterling

There weren't many job opportunities available in Bokoshe, but they managed until after my brother Bill was born on April 20, 1931. Not long after his birth, Daddy told Mama that he had found a better job in Panama. My mother knew that the real reason was because Daddy was homesick for his own blood kin. They moved to Panama just in time for me to be born on March 21, 1933.

I was born in a small apartment in the back of one of Panama's commercial buildings. My younger brother, Luther, was born on March 19, 1940 in a small house about a block north of there. This small house is where we lived until we moved to Galveston in 1943. We returned to this little house for about a year or two, after the war, but Dad ended up selling it and moved us back to Galveston. Dad owned about a quarter of the block that this little house sat on. This oversized lot provided plenty of room for a garden, a clothes line and an outhouse with lots of room left over for us kids to play on. The only thing wrong with this property was it didn't have a water well. Luckily for us, our closest neighbor was kind enough to let us draw water from his well. Bill and I shared the job of fetching water. We didn't mind much except that it did interrupt our play.

## BILLS FIRST MISHAP

According to Mama, our first home in Panama was a rented house, just across the highway from Ramsey's Gas Station. Living across the highway from Ramsey's set the scene for the first of many near fatal happenings for my brother Bill. Armed with a nickel, Bill went across the highway to Ramsey's and bought some candy. On his return trip, Mom and Dad watched in horror as he was hit by a truck. He was caught by the front bumper and dragged several yards before finally letting go. The truck passed over him leaving him bruised but without further harm. Dad rushed him to the doctor who tended his bruises and made sure he was ok. Bill became an instant celebrity. Dad spent the rest of the day taking Bill around town, buying him soda pop and bragging about his near fatal accident.

I do not know who was the luckiest that day, Bill or me. Both of us loved adventure, but Bill was a real risk taker. I loved the daring but I learned very early in my life to let Bill test the waters. Much of Bill's education came from taking chances while mine came from watching Bill and avoiding his mistakes.