

CHAPTER II - THE FAMILY MIGRATES WEST



Pictured above: Bill Sterling (blonde headed boy) Man with Charles on his lap.
Lou and Luke Sterling are in the middle of the second row.

My earliest memory of Panama is of leaving it. The double whammy of the great depression and the tragic dust bowl of the 30s had caused my parents to pull up stakes to seek a better life. As luck would have it, my dad's Uncle Charley owned a small used car lot in Fort Smith. My dad traded an almost new cook stove for an old Model A Ford and decided to seek their fortunes out west. What I remember most about this old clunker is that it was black and it had an area called "the back seat." This back seat area was used to house anything that couldn't be stuffed into the trunk or tied to the roof. My brother and I were left with the small "crawl space" that was left between these tightly packed boxes, blankets and the roof of the old car.

The first leg of our trip took us from Panama to McAlester, Oklahoma to hook up with my dad's brother, Uncle Clyde and his wife, Harriett. Dad and Uncle Clyde took turns following each other as they motored west. From McAlester we drove to Carpenter, Oklahoma. From Carpenter we went to Phoenix and then on to Salinas, California, then to Gridley and finally, back to Panama.

MY GREAT UNCLE TOT'S FARM

We stopped at Carpenter because my mother's "Uncle Tot" had a farm there. "Uncle Tot" was my Grandfather Ragains' only brother. His given name was Grant. "Tot" was a nickname that he picked up when he was a child because he was shorter than all the other kids. At first they called him "Little Tot," but this quickly evolved to just plain "Tot". Since he was an uncle to almost everyone in his family, he was lovingly called, "Uncle Tot." When he was 93, he wrote a letter to my mother's sister, Aunt Elizabeth that he signed, "Uncle Grant". In a post script he explains, "You notice I signed your letter, 'Your Uncle Grant' instead of 'Your Uncle Tot'. I was named for my Uncle Grant Carlton, a good man in every respect. He was my mother's brother." I have spent a lifetime calling my great Uncle Grant, "Uncle Tot." From this point forward I will try to honor his wishes by calling him "Uncle Grant," his proper name.

It was cotton picking time, and Uncle Grant let us camp in his granary while earning a little gas money by picking cotton. My mother remembers Uncle Grant's granary as being really nice. She said that it had hardwood floors and was clean and dry.

I wasn't much more than a toddler at the time and as a cotton picker, I could best be described as Mama's little handicap. I remember spending a lot of time riding on the pickin'

sack that my mother dragged up and down the long rows of cotton. In order to give Mama a little relief someone gave my brother Bill and me pillow cases to use as our very own pickin' sacks. We then started picking cotton like the grown ups were doing. I don't remember either of us doing much picking because of our limited interest span. Soon our interest turned to other things. Bill and I discovered Uncle Grant's kerosene barrel.

The "drip can" that sat under the kerosene barrel spigot was the first thing to catch my attention. I became fascinated with the strata of dregs that were trapped between the bottom layer of water and the top layer of kerosene. A dreg is a particle of sediment that sinks to the bottom of a liquid. The obvious cause of this phenomenon is that oil is lighter than water. The tiny layer of dregs was heavy enough to sink to the bottom of the kerosene but light enough to float on top of the water. As I continued my adventurous escape from the cotton patch, I noticed the small vent hole plug that was located at the top of the barrel. I discovered that if I twisted the plug enough in a counter clockwise direction, it would loosen and expose a mysteriously fascinating hole. As far as I was concerned, this hole only had one excuse for existing. It was there solely for my amusement. For reasons known only to 3 and 5 year olds, we decided to stuff our cotton bolls down the kerosene vent hole. Lucky for us, Uncle Grant discovered our game before we could do much damage. He scolded us for playing with his kerosene barrel and sent us back to Mama. Years later, my wife, and best friend, commented that this was a "little boy" thing. She pointed out that all little boys are fascinated with poking things in holes.

IT'S A LONG WAY TO PHOENIX

Once again, we headed west in Dad's over- stuffed jalopy. Bill and I were packed in tightly on top of suitcases, pots, pans, blankets and other stuff. Mile after endless mile, Bill and I rode in this cramped back seat torture chamber. It wasn't all torture however. What I remember most about the long drive from western Oklahoma to Phoenix was the wondrous scenery and the chatter of my parents. I loved listening to their stories and explanations of why things were. Most memorable were the Painted Desert and the fascinating Petrified Forest. The idea of wood turning into stone was mind-boggling to me, as a small child. Even more mystifying were the Superstition Mountains off in the distance. Hidden somewhere in these rugged mountains is the fabled "Lost Dutchman Mine."

These mountains were supposed to be sacred to the Indians. The Indians or their ancestral ghost would kill anyone foolish enough to trespass over these sacred grounds. Hidden somewhere in this forbidden terrain is suppose to be a fabulously rich gold mine that was originally discovered by two German prospectors. It is believed that these two old "Dutchmen" had a falling out and one of them went crazy and killed the other. He then hid the mine entrance and headed into town for provisions and a little recreation.

Over the next several years, several men tried to follow the crazy old Dutchman back to the mine but none were successful. Many mysteriously disappeared, never to be seen again. The local Indians considered crazy people as being touched by holy spirits. Obviously touched in the head, he was allowed to wander unmolested throughout these sacred mountains for the rest of his life.

WHAT'S AN "OKIE"?

In addition to the local folk lore and the wonders of nature, Mom and Dad also told jokes and stories to help make our long journey more agreeable. It was on this journey that I first heard the nickname "Okie," referring to a person from Oklahoma. Usually, this nickname wasn't used in a complementary way. Out west it was commonly used to refer to any poor person who came from the South.

"Okie" jokes were rampant. One joke went: "How can you tell a rich Okie from a poor Okie?" Answer: "A rich Okie has two mattresses on top of his car." Another joke asks, "What do you call a gasoline siphoning hose?" Answer, "An Okie credit card." I remember my Dad telling a story about an Okie who made it all the way to California without buying any gas for his car. He would drive for a few miles, stop and wave down a passing vehicle. He would explain to the stopped motorist that he had run out of gas and asked if he could siphon just enough for him to make it to the next service station. Usually the stopped motorist would let him have a gallon or two. Dad said that this little ruse worked like a charm until his greed got the better of him. He stopped a passing motorist when his own tank was near full. He overflowed his own tank while nearly emptying the Good Samaritan's tank.

In another old joke, the Governor of California was perplexed over the large number of Okies that had invaded his state. In answer to his problem, one of his aides came up with the perfect solution. He advised the Governor to plant a row of cotton from California to Oklahoma and let the Okies pick their way back home. Unfortunately, the solution wasn't perfect after all. When it came time for the second picking, the Okies all picked their way back to California.

PHOENIX, OUR GATEWAY TO CALIFORNIA

After what seemed forever, we arrived at the outskirts of Phoenix. Mama and Daddy found work harvesting lettuce. Daddy was recruited out of the fields and was put to work in the lettuce crate box factory. The packing company transferred one of Dad's bosses, Earl Moore, to Salinas, California and told Dad that he had a job there if he ever needed one.

Leaving Phoenix, we continued our western trek. I remember being fascinated by the remnants of an old plank road that ran parallel to our highway. I was told that people used to cross over the sand dunes on this old road. I don't remember anything after that until we arrived at the west coast of Southern California.

MY FIRST GLIMPSE OF THE PACIFIC OCEAN

It was here that I got my first glimpse of the Pacific Ocean. What a marvelous sight it was. The rocky coast harbored a magnificent tidal basin. The water was blue all the way to the horizon except within the rocky coastal region where it was crystal clear. Looking straight down into the water, a pretty little sea shell seemed to call out to me. It appeared to be only a foot or two away and needed me to rescue it from its watery depth. I rolled up a shirt sleeve, so that I wouldn't get it wet, and reached for the coveted shell. The depth of my wondrous treasure was much greater than I had thought. My Mother tried to come to my rescue, but this coveted mollusk was far out of her reach as well. I left the seashore disappointed and empty handed.

In Southern California, Dad found work for the entire family harvesting fruit. Dad would knock the fruit off the trees with a long stick while Mom, Bill and I gathered the fallen fruit into baskets. At first my brother Bill and I ate more fruit than we gathered, but our production increased once our tummies became full.

BILL'S SECOND MISHAP

When going to and returning from the orchard groves, Bill and I often rode in the back of a flatbed truck owned by another migrant farmer. Our family and another fruit harvesting family had joined forces and were working as a team. The two families made camp together, and we rode back and forth from the camp to the orchard in the other family's pick up truck. The adults were crowded together in the cab while us kids rode in the back. In those days it was legal for kids to ride in the back of a pick up truck. It was legal but not very smart. Our route from camp to orchard was over a narrow country road that cut through an orange grove. Bill and I decided that it would be great fun to see which of us could snag the most leaves off of the overhanging orange branches. Not satisfied with his small collection of leaves, Bill decided to grab himself an orange. Well, something went wrong. The orange that Bill grabbed refused to let go of the tree, and Bill refused to let go of the orange. Much to our horror, the tree limb catapulted Bill out of the truck bed. He was left shaken but otherwise unharmed, standing all alone in the middle of the orchard lane. The occupants of the truck quickly ran back to where Bill was standing. Mama was so relieved to find him still alive that she gave him a big hug. Dad got on to all of us and told us not to grab any more fruit from the back of the truck.

It was during these days that I remember my first visit to Knott's Berry Farm. They didn't have a lot of carnival rides like they have today or if they did, I don't remember them. What I remember is a chicken. Knott's Berry Farm had the smartest chicken in the whole world. It could add, count and even play basketball. They had this tiny little hoop and this tiny little basketball. This big red chicken would slam dunk this little basketball and then run over to a chute for a kernel of corn as her reward. It was the most amazing thing that I had ever seen.

SALINAS AND APRICOT BRANDY

After breaking camp in Southern California, we headed north to Salinas, about 50 miles south of San Francisco. Mom, Dad, Uncle Clyde and Aunt Harriett all found jobs with the same lettuce company that they had worked for in Arizona. I'll never forget our "home" in Salinas. We lived in one-half of an old railroad box car. Uncle Clyde and Aunt Harriett lived in the other half. I'll also never forget my embarrassment from one of our neighbors, who thought it was cute to have their little girl show me her "moon." They loved teasing me about it. It bothered me a lot more than I let on. Another memory permanently etched in my brain is one of a pint bottle of apricot brandy. One afternoon Mom and Dad were busying themselves sipping apricot brandy and playing dominoes when Uncle Clyde stuck his head in and invited them next door for some serious partying. Because apricot brandy was sipping stuff, and not for serious partying, Dad retired his bottle of brandy to the top shelf in the cupboard and he and Mom went next door leaving Bill and me home alone. Earlier, in a moment of weakness, Dad let Bill and I have a little sip out of his brandy bottle. That turned out to be a big mistake. Almost immediately after Mom and Dad left, Bill and I put our heads together and started figuring out a way to get hold of that bottle. Bill came up with a plan. He stood on a chair and had me climb up on his shoulders and retrieve our prize. It was absolutely delicious. Unfortunately this episode left me with a craving for apricot brandy that haunts me to this very day.

OUR LAST CAMP, GRIDLEY

From here we ventured over into the San Joaquin Valley with a side trip to the Sequoia National Forest. There I saw a giant redwood tree that was so big that our whole family couldn't lock hands and reach around it. One of these magnificent giants even had a road running through it. We then continued our journey on north to Gridley, which is a small farming community about 60 miles north of Sacramento. In Gridley we lived in a tent camp for migrants.

We stayed in Gridley until Dad was offered a better job up in Oregon. We never saw Oregon however. Instead, we headed back to Panama via Salt Lake City. I don't remember the City but I do remember the Lake. I was amazed by the fact that things that would sink in ordinary water would float in this huge body of water.

WHY DID WE RETURN TO PANAMA?

Years later, I asked my Mom why we came back to Panama all of a sudden, instead of going on up to Oregon. Mama told me that it was because my Aunt Hazel had become a handful. My Grandmother Sterling asked Dad to come back to Panama and help keep an eye on her. My Dad being the oldest son, felt obligated to return to Panama and help his mother manage his only sister.