

CHAPTER XXI - I FINALLY RETIRE

TAKING CARE OF MARGARET

For awhile, I managed to keep my obligations to Solar and take care of Margaret, but she was getting worse. It became necessary to take more and more time off to care of her. I told my supervisor that if my phone rang and it was Margaret Ann needing me I would have to leave immediately. I would tell a fellow employee to note the time I left and I would go. I told him that I would not waste any time looking for a supervisor or stop and explain why I was leaving. He said that would be fine. He went on to say that he understood and I could work irregular hours if I wanted to. He said that I could come and go as I felt necessary.

It wasn't long after we came to this understanding that it became obvious that I was needed at home full time. I stopped by Social Security and filled out all the papers needed for retirement and Medicare. The next morning I went to the plant to fill out my retirement papers and hurry back home to Margaret Ann. When I arrived at the plant, I found the front office closed. The Company President had called for an all hands gathering in the central working area. At the meeting he announced that there was going to be a major reduction in force and anyone eligible for retirement would be given a generous bonus, if they retired at this time. His plan amounted to something like six months base pay less taxes for me. Of course, I jumped at the deal and retired that very morning. The only thing I missed was the traditional retirement cake and the party.

MARGARET REQUIRES 100% OXYGEN

Not long after my retirement, Margaret Ann was put on an oxygen machine breathing 100% pure oxygen. She could still go places but had to be in a wheel chair hooked up with portable oxygen tank. She loved going to therapy. She was one of about sixteen in her class. About all she could manage was the treadmill at a very low setting and the exercise bike set on no resistance. She got close to zero exercise out of her sessions but loved the camaraderie. She also loved shopping. One tank of oxygen was good for about two department stores. I would push her up one aisle and down another paying close attention to her hand signals. She enjoyed feeling the material and would make me back up if I didn't linger quite long enough to suit her. She continued her almost daily routine of shopping until it finally dawned on her that she would never wear any of the "outfits" that she bought. After her last trip to the hospital, she never went shopping again.

Because of her limitations we had to rearrange things in our big two story house. We had four bedrooms upstairs and a living room, a dining room, a den and a kitchen downstairs. Since she could no longer climb the stairs, I turned our living room into a bedroom for the two of us. I brought twin beds down from upstairs so that I could always be near her. Everything was working out nicely, except for Margaret Ann's gigantic wardrobe.

Margaret lived for clothes. She had so many "outfits" that I finally had to turn the formal dining room into a giant walk in closet for her. Because she was unable to climb the stairs she took to using me to fetch outfits for her. An appointment with her doctor, her therapy class or her hairdresser could send me upstairs on a search mission five or six times before I finally got it right. My outfit fetching was usually followed by several more trips searching for the right

purse, shoes and costume jewelry. At times her indecisiveness would wear me to a frazzle. Creating a downstairs closet was really more for my benefit than it was for her.

I bought eight six foot long garment racks and arranged them into four rows separated by three aisles. I then cleared out her upstairs closets and brought all of her outfits downstairs so that she could look through them whenever she wished. Each garment rack was supported by four caster wheels so that I could roll them into Margaret Ann at times when she wasn't up to walking into her new downstairs closet. Each of the garment racks was topped by a shelf that was ideal for her shoes and purses.

As her trips and stays at the hospital increased in frequency it became obvious that she would never get any better. Her doctor described her condition as being like a person hanging on the ledge of a cliff. Margaret Ann was definitely dying but she could hang on for a very long time or she could let go at any moment. At the end of her last stay at the hospital, a hospital bureaucrat informed me that she was too sick to stay in the hospital any longer. Margaret would have to be moved to a nursing home. He recommended one that was near the hospital and said that I had 24 hours to move her. I drove around and inspected several nursing homes in the area and found them all wanting. A social worker told me that Margaret Ann's condition qualified her for Hospice care. I contacted Hospice and told them that if she could help me find a hospital bed that I would care for Margaret Ann at home. Hospice lent me a hospital bed and everything else I needed. Then they scheduled visits several times a week to make sure we were all right. Hospice was absolutely wonderful.

MARGARET ANN'S SUFFERING ENDS

Except for potty breaks and a quick shower every morning, I was with Margaret constantly during her final weeks. On the final night of her life, I checked on her just a little before midnight. She seemed to be doing ok so I crawled into my bed and collapsed into a deep sleep. An eerie stillness woke me about 2 a.m. 15 March 2000. My sweet Margaret was dead. We had lived as husband and wife for forty-seven years.

The first telephone call I made was to Hospice. They sent an ambulance out to take Margaret away leaving me in a big empty house, all alone. After my call to Hospice, I called my two daughters. Patti rushed over so that we could comfort each other. Margaret Ann's last wishes was to be cremated and for her ashes to be buried at the Federal Cemetery at Rosecrans. Patti volunteered to make all the arrangements. A Chaplin from Hospice conducted the memorial service at the Neptune Chapel at Lakeside where we all said our final goodbye to Margaret Ann.

The house in El Cajon was too big and too lonely without Margaret. I was both lonely and restless. For the first time in over forty six years, I didn't have anything to do or anyone to take care of. I spent my first week as a widower filling out insurance papers and canceling all of Margaret's credit cards. After that I started disposing of all of Margaret Ann's things. I started out by having Patti and Cindy take everything of their mothers that they wanted. After that, I let Margaret Ann's grandchildren choose. Next I let her sister, cousins, and finally her friends picked through her things. Everything left after that was hauled off and given to Goodwill.

I HEAD FOR OKLAHOMA

Next, I hired a realtor and put the house up for sale. Leaving this final detail in the hands of my realtor, I threw my suitcase and a few personal mementoes into the car and headed for Oklahoma. I chose Oklahoma mainly because my daughter, Cindy, my three granddaughters, Erica, Breanna and Elisabeth and my grandson, Richard, all lived there. Cindy owned a nice big house a few miles not far from New Prue, about 25 miles west of Tulsa. The original Prue had been settled on the banks of the Arkansas River in 1905. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dammed up the Arkansas River near Prue in 1964, creating Keystone Lake. Because of this newly created lake, the old town of Prue had to be relocated, hence the name New Prue. Once there, I bought a little house about three miles from Cindy's place. As it turned out, my new home was a bit too rural for my taste. There was a combination grocery store, gas station, restaurant, and bait shop about seven miles from my house. To find a real restaurant, Wal-Mart or grocery store I had to drive fifteen miles west to Cleveland or twenty five miles east to Sand Springs. To get to either, I had to travel over the scenic Prue road. It is debatable whether this road had more curves or potholes. As much as I enjoyed being around Cindy and my grandkids, it wasn't enough to fill the emptiness within me. They were busy living their own lives and that left me all alone, most of the time. I took to traveling. I had my Mom and two brothers in Texas. I also had first cousins in Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, Louisiana and Texas. I decided I would gypsy around the country and visit them all. Somewhere in the middle of all this visiting, the Ragains held their twentieth annual reunion. It was hosted by my mother and my brothers in Texas City. For the reunion, I booked adjoining rooms at a motel for my granddaughters, Erica, Breanna, Elisabeth and me. Patti and her husband rented a waterfront cabana, over on Galveston Island and I forget where Cindy and her boyfriend stayed. My granddaughters were doing a wonderful job of filling the void left by Margaret Ann's death. The four of us attended all of the scheduled functions and between functions we went sight seeing all over the Texas City - Galveston area. I finally ran out of things to do and places to go when thoughts of my ex sister-in-law, Anita Cooper entered my mind. "How would you like to go over and visit Aunt Anita?" I asked my granddaughters. They all answered with an enthusiastic, "Yes." I gave Anita a call and asked her if it would be ok. She said, "Sure, come over." So we did.

ANITA COOPER STEPS INTO MY LIFE

It was a nice enjoyable visit. Anita offered refreshments and took us on a tour of her house. Anita is a talented home decorator and her house was a real showplace. Everyone including Anita seemed to enjoy our visit. When it was time to leave, Anita walked out to the car with us. Just before I got in, I asked her if she would like to go out on a date with me while I was in town. She gave me a very definite, "I don't know." She followed this with, "I'll think about it and let you know." I didn't know it then but Anita has a very good friend named Myrita Wilson. She was in the habit of calling Myrita before making almost any decision. After I left with the kids, Anita called Myrita and they discussed all the pros and cons connected to dating an ex-brother-in-law. Anita pointed out to Myrita that she had vowed never to date again unless Prince Charming came knocking at her door. Myrita told her that I may very well be her Prince Charming and advised her to go out with me. Since that time, almost every time I speak to Anita's best friend, I feel compelled to say, "Thank you Myrita."

STERLING TRADITION OF MARRIAGES AND DIVORCES

Anita and my brother Luther were divorced in 1991 after 32 years of marriage. Divorce was a common occurrence in the Sterling family and I hated it. It was almost a Sterling tradition to marry, live a few years as man and wife and then divorce. Sometimes they got it right the second time around; but not always. My older brother, Bill, never seemed to get it right. He had Sterling vs. Sterling encounters with Gloria Turner, Rebecca Mayherne and Dorothy Johnston. He died on 18 May 2002 at his home in Texas City, Texas. I never met his last wife, but records show that at the time of his death he was still married to a woman named Julia Streber.

My great-grandfather Thomas Sterling never divorced any of his three wives but his first two, Sarah Joanna Oliver and Mary Effie Stephens, probably died from a lack of birth control. His third wife was a lot younger than Thomas and outlived him by nearly 53 years.

My Grandfather, William Jefferson Sterling's first wife was Iva Bell Elwood, his young step sister. Iva Bell was six months pregnant when William Jefferson and Iva Bell were confronted by William Jefferson's step mother and Iva Bell's mother, Mary Effie. Mary ordered the young fornicators into a wagon and hauled them to Texas and made them get married. My grandfather took no notice of Iva Bell or his baby daughter after that. Because of his philandering, Iva Bell filed for divorce and was awarded custody of their daughter, Gladys Ruth Sterling. Shortly after the divorce, William Jefferson married my grandmother, Matilda Ann Seigrist.

My Dad's first wife was a lady named Esther Hebert. They were married less than a year. After their divorce he married my Mom. This was a good thing for me, of course. There wouldn't have been a "me" without my Mom and Dad getting together. When I was almost four, Uncle Clyde married Aunt Harriett Mathis. I adored Aunt Harriett. She had the prettiest black hair. I can remember, when I was very young, telling my mother that I wished she was as pretty as Aunt Harriet. The fact is my mother was gorgeous, but she was a red head and I loved long wavy black hair. I also had a little extra love for Aunt Harriet because Uncle Clyde was mean as hell when he was drunk and he was usually always drunk. Next Uncle Harry married Aunt Eva Nell Barlow the day after Christmas in 1939. I've often wondered if it was a long engagement or they just got carried away after a Christmas Party. Their marriage was followed by Uncle Charley marrying Ruth West in 1940. I only have a vague memory of Ruth. They broke up when Uncle Charley enlisted in the Army. Charley went on to marry my Aunt Mary Brown in 1944. I adored my Aunt Mary too. Finally Aunt Hazel, the baby of the family, married Uncle Jimmy Collins. That marriage didn't last either. After her and Jimmy were divorced she married Frank Black.

My Dad and all of his brothers spent most of their free time either drunk or trying their best to get that way. My aunts on the other hand, were the nurturers. Most of the love I received in my early life came from my mother and these wonderful ladies. I hate to say, it but I never felt loved by my father or any of his brothers.

If there was anything that the Sterling's were big on, outside of drinking, it was loyalty to Sterling blood. In the event of a divorce or a family squabble, it was always the fault of the Sterling's spouse. After each divorce, the ex was talked about in damning tones. Each divorce was followed by replacement spouse who was welcomed into the Sterling family with loving arms. This left me very confused. These new aunts were not aunts at all as far as I was concerned. To me they were outsiders pretending to be my aunts. I never forgave my uncles for ridding themselves of my real aunts.

LUTHER CONTINUES THE TRADITION

When my brother and Anita divorced, it was the same thing passed on to the next generation. Luther was the good guy and Anita was “the Bitch from Hell.” It didn’t seem to matter that Anita caught Luther in bed with one of our cousins. Nor did it matter that Anita had given him two children and 32 years of her life. Luther was free to shack up with a blood relative and Anita was free to go to hell.

Over the years Anita and my wife, Margaret Ann, had become very close friends. I liked Anita and it pleased me that she and Margaret Ann liked each other. One of the reasons they got along well together was because they shared a common enemy. My mother had a little devil in her and seemed to enjoy stirring up trouble between her daughters-in-law. Margaret and Anita got wise to this early on and began comparing notes as a matter of self-defense. Anita remained in the Texas City area after she divorced Luther and we were back in California, so we didn’t get to see Anita very often. About once a year, Margaret Ann and I would drive back to Texas to visit my parents. Sometime during our stay in Texas City we would usually drop by Anita’s to see how she was doing.

LUKE AND I DISAGREE

In 1992, the Annual Ragains Family Reunion was held in San Diego. This wasn’t long after Anita and Luther were divorced. Luther called me and asked if he and Linda could stay at my place for the reunion. I told Luther that he was welcome and my cousin Linda was welcome but they would not be welcome to stay at our house together. I told him that Margaret Ann and I would never consent to an unmarried couple shacking up under our roof. Luther hit the ceiling. We began yelling awful things at each other. I was shocked when Mama got on the phone and took Luther’s side. Mama told me that if one of her sons wasn’t welcome in our house then neither was she. I tried to tell her that Luther was welcome in our house and so was she. What wasn’t acceptable was for Luther and Linda to sleep together under our roof. Mama would have none of it. A riff was created between Mom and me that took several years to heal.

ANITA PINS ME “D.R.T. HUSBAND”

Anita and I went together for almost a year before we finally decided to marry. I proposed to her several times and her answer was always no. I finally gave up and told her that she had heard my final proposal. I told her that if she ever changed her mind she would have to be the one doing the proposing. At the next Daughters of the Republic of Texas (D.R.T.) gathering we went to, Anita presented me with a beautiful little pin that was inscribed, “D.R.T. Husband.” I took this as a proposal and without hesitation I answered, “I accept.” Anita and I were married on 27 May 2001 in Houston, Texas. Anita decided that she would not change her name to Sterling again. In rebuttal, I told her that her not changing her name to Sterling was o.k. but by the same token, I would not change my name to Cooper. Even though I didn’t change my name to Cooper, I am well known in D.R.T circles as “Mr. Anita Cooper”. I heard it enough that I couldn’t resist buying a name tag that said, “Mr. Anita Cooper, D.R.T. Husband.” I often wear my pin and name tag when I escort Anita to a D.R.T. function. Many of the ladies tell Anita that they wish they could make their husbands wear a “Mr. Jane Doe” name tag like the “Mr. Anita Cooper” name tag I wear. Anita delights in telling them that buying and wearing this name tag was my idea and not hers. Unfortunately I am not eligible to be a member of the Sons of the

Republic of Texas, but even so I feel honored and proud to be the husband of a Daughter of the Republic of Texas.

Anita is a sixth generation Texan and is a dedicated member of the DRT. Texas won its independence from Mexico in 1836 and was an independent nation until it became a state in 1845. Anita and all the other Daughters of the Republic had ancestors living in the Republic during this time frame. Anita takes great pride in the fact that she is a sixth generation Texan. Her ancestor, Thomas McClure Rice, migrated to Texas sometime between 1836 and 1842 from Ohio. While defending Texas sovereignty near Salado Creek, not far from San Antonio, he was killed by the invading Mexican Army. He was a member of a 53 man company under Captain Nicholas Dawson. In a historic and disastrous battle, now called the Dawson Massacre, thirty-six Texas patriots were killed, fifteen more were captured and three managed to escape. Anita's ancestor was one of those killed. He was buried in a shallow grave along-side his fallen comrades. In 1848, a group of patriotic citizens from La Grange reentered these heroic souls along with the victims of the ill-fated Mier Expedition. They were all encased in a cement vault that serves as a common tomb on Monument Hill Bluff overlooking La Grange.

I FINALLY TELL MAMA ABOUT ANITA

I avoided telling my Mother that I was dating Anita for a long time. I wasn't sure how she would react to having Anita as a daughter-in-law for the second time. About once a week, I would drop by Mom's house for a short visit. Mama knew I was dating someone but didn't know who. When she pushed me for an answer I told her that "a gentleman doesn't tell" and let it go at that. I suppose I still resented her for siding with my brother against me at the 1998 San Diego Ragains Reunion. Finally, after tormenting her for a few months, I told her that the new woman in my life was her ex-daughter-in-law. At least outwardly she seemed pleased with the news. I felt that if there were any ill feelings, on her part, she would do her best to hide them. My brother, Luther, knew better than to say anything to me about Anita, especially after the shoddy way that he had treated her. Linda, my cousin and Luther's concubine, usually stayed in one of the back rooms, while I was there. In any case my feelings were very strong about Anita, whether they liked them or not.

Anita and I spent a lot of time traveling together. We flew to London and cruised the Baltic. We stayed on the same cruise liner and rode it from England to Athens. After spending a couple of days in Athens, we flew to Copenhagen for a six-day stay. From Copenhagen we flew back to London. We had planned on renting a car and touring England for a couple of weeks but decided to cancel and fly home instead. We were simply worn out from so much traveling. Since that maiden tour, we have managed several other trips. We went on one cruise ship from Florida to San Diego by the way of the Panama Canal and on another from Vancouver to Alaska. We have also enjoyed five or six Caribbean cruises. On land we have driven to Sarasota, Florida twice and San Diego, California several times. We have also pretty well covered all of Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas. We've also made trips to New York City, Boston and Sudbury, Massachusetts.

When not traveling, I spent a lot of time picking Mama's brain about family history. Some of my Arkansas cousins had told me that Aunt Dorothy, Mama's little sister, was suffering from dementia and I knew that Mama wasn't far behind her. Aunt Dorothy's memory was completely gone and Mama's was fading fast. I wanted to be sure to put as much of our families history on paper as possible before it was too late. Without these stories, our family isn't much more than a bunch of names and dates on pieces of paper. In the last few months before Mama

died, she was completely out of touch with reality. She spent her final days in a nursing home about a half mile from her home in Texas City. Her room had a view of the nursing home parking lot. She would look at the parked cars and would say something like. “I wonder why Bill has so many cars parked in our driveway and I wonder why he doesn’t come to see me more often.” I didn’t have the heart to tell her that Bill had died four and a half years earlier. I would answer her by saying, “Mama, you know how Bill is about old cars. He’ll get rid of them one of these days.” Bill was still alive in her memory and in her heart. She had memories of Daddy too but her memory of him had lost its sharpness. Whenever I mentioned Daddy, she would often complain that she could no longer remember what he looked like. Sometimes she would talk about Aunt Dorothy. Once she told me that she had seen her sister, Dorothy, at a dance the previous night. I asked her if they had talked and what did they talk about. Mama told me that they couldn’t talk to each other because Aunt Dorothy was on the other side of the room and there were a lot of people separating them. She went on to say, “We waved at each other, though.” I tried to dismiss these encounters as dreams but I couldn’t because they seemed too vivid to be dreams. Mama and Aunt Dorothy were giving comfort to each other in their own little world. Their minds were demented but their hearts were still full of love. Mama drew her last breath on 30 October 2006 and was laid to rest at Forest Park East Cemetery next to my father and my son, Richard. My father’s mom and dad are also buried there. Aunt Hazel followed Mama a year later. She died on 17 November 2007. She was also buried at Forest Park East Cemetery. Aunt Dorothy was the last of her generation to leave this world. She died on 5 February 2008 at Lamar, Arkansas. She was buried at the Ballew’s Chapel Cemetery, Grubbs, Arkansas.

There’s still room in the W. J. Sterling / L. E. Sterling family plot for one more resident. Logically either my brother Luther or I will claim this one remaining resting place. Frankly, I am in no hurry to declare ownership of this legacy. Since I dedicated over 20 years of my life to my country it would please me if the trustee of my estate would have my remains delivered to the nearest naval facility and request that I be buried at sea. Since I made a small contribution to our space program, it would be nice if my final remains could be blasted into orbit. That way every ninety minutes my daughters could look up at the sky and say, “There goes Daddy.”