

## CHAPTER XXXII - GEORGE HARVEY SEIGRIST 1864 –1944



Seigris Family

When I first met my great grandfather, Seigris, he was living alone in a teepee just outside of Panama. He had outlived three or four wives and was beginning to slow down. Papa Seigris was my Grandmother Sterling's father. His teepee wasn't far from her house and she looked in on him every day to make sure he was doing ok.

His full name was George Harvey Warren Seigris and he was born in Illinois on February 14, 1864. He was destined to lead a wonderfully exciting life. As a child, I was fascinated with this old teepee dweller. My brother Bill and I loved visiting this exciting old relic from the past. We would sit in awe of his presence, showing him the quiet respect we felt he deserved. Afterwards, we would swing by our grandmother's house and ask Mama Sterling the questions we should have been asking her father.

One of the questions we asked was about our Indian blood. Was Papa Seigris a real Indian? I asked this and other good questions but back in those days I was usually too impatient to hear the entire answer. I do remember her telling us that she was part Indian. I don't remember if she said her Indian blood was on her mother's or her father's side of the family. I also remember her saying that when she was younger, the government was registering all Indians. Her family was suspicious of the government motives and refused to register. Indians and half-breeds were treated badly in those days. Since there are no documents certifying our Indian blood, I turned to DNA to help find answers. DNA tests were run on my Dad's sister, and on me. These test confirmed the fact that Native American blood flows through our veins. My DNA estimates my ancestral make up to be 75% Indo-European, 11% East Asian and 14% Native-American.

Another question we could have asked was about the number of wives Papa Seigris had outlived. One story that bothered me a great deal as a child was that my great grandfather had survived ten wives. It was said that his first nine wives had all died from eating poison mushrooms. The tenth one died from a crushed skull. She had refused to eat her mushrooms! I now recognize this as joke and not a very good one at that. Unfortunately, I was too young to understand this at the time and swallowed the story hook, line and sinker.

Later Papa Seigris abandoned his teepee and moved into the old utility shed that sat behind the burned out Stephens' house. There was a hand dug well on the Stephens property, but it had become contaminated and the water had turned sour. The nearest well, with good water, was at Mama and Papa Ragains' house next door. My brother and I figured that Papa was too old to be

carrying water and made it our habit to fetch him a fresh bucket of water every day. One afternoon, my brother and I startled the poor old man by barging in unannounced. Our glee quickly turned to panic when we saw that Papa had a double-barreled shotgun leveled at us. After things calmed down a bit, Papa got on to us for startling him. He said that, in the future, we should start yelling “Papa” as loud as we could anytime we approached his house.



George and Matilda (Ehrhart) Seigris

Not long after this World War II broke out and disrupted everyone’s lives. Mom and Dad upped and moved to Galveston, Texas where they obtained jobs in the ship building industry. The money was good and it helped keep Dad from being drafted into the Army. I forgot all about Papa Seigris for awhile until almost a year later when someone told me that he had died. I was told that he was found lying in a ditch with a water bucket in his hand. It broke my heart. I felt that if I had stayed in Panama to carry water for him, he would not have died. I later learned that this story was a complete fabrication. Papa actually died in a hospital in North Little Rock. Because of this misunderstanding, I carried guilt around with me for many years.

Years later I learned that Mama Sterling hadn’t liked him living in his old shed and convinced him to move into a little shed behind her house. Papa Seigris lived there until Mama and Papa Sterling followed Dad to Galveston. Instead of joining the Sterling migration, Papa Seigris decided to move to Vian, Oklahoma to be closer to one of his five sons. From Vian he moved to North Little Rock where he died on March 23, 1943.

Papa was buried next to his son, George Jr. in the Thomas Cemetery in North Little Rock, not far from the Arkansas River. Another son, Phillip, was buried there in 1946. The grave of a fourth Seigris lies just a few yards from this threesome. It contains the last remains of an infant named Donnie Ray. Each of these graves are marked with concrete molded headstones gaily decorated with many glass marbles embedded in their face. Vandals and time have taken their toll on these markers. The copper nameplates that at one time identified the individual stones are now missing as are some of the colorful marbles.

Looking back on Papa Seigris’s life, I can safely say that if he wasn’t born on the river, he was born very near it. He was to spend most of his life on or near one of the mighty rivers that formed the heart of the United States. He spent most of his life working as a common laborer and a part-time musician. As a musician, he enjoyed a modest success with a string band called the Riverside Ramblers. His rendition of “Ain’t Satisfied” (1937) can be found on a historical

album “Country, Western and Western Swing 1924-1938.” His little band, fit in well with riverfront honky-tonks and backwoods barn dances common to that era.

When he was eighteen Papa married his first wife, Alice Chesher in Tremont, Illinois. This marriage turned out to be a big mistake and it came back to haunt him. While still married to Alice, Papa met and fell in love with my great grandmother, “Maggie” Ehrhart and married her on July 3, 1884. For reasons not recorded, Papa had not bothered to divorce Alice Chesher before his second marriage. Because of this oversight, Papa was indicted and found guilty of bigamy. He was sentenced to 18 months in prison on September 16, 1884. My great grandmother waited lovingly as Papa served his time. Their first son, George Jr. was born on November 14, 1886, just 26 months after Papa’s bigamy conviction. George Jr. was followed by Emma, my grandmother Matilda, Dan, Walter, Phillip and finally Roy.

The Seigrist family continued life in Tremont until around 1904. At that time, a city police officer became infatuated with my great grandmother, Maggie. Upset by this unwanted attention, Papa took out a gun and shot the policeman. The shot wasn’t fatal, but Papa didn’t hang around to confirm this fact. Fearing for his life at the hands of the local police, Papa fled. He floated his house boat down the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers to St. Louis and then up the Missouri River to Callaway County in Missouri.

In the spring of 1910, the Seigrist families migrated back down the river to St. Louis and were living on their houseboat on the Illinois side of the Mississippi. While living there, Papa and his son, George Jr., decided to cross the river into St. Louis, get drunk and raise a little hell. They were drinking and playing poker at the Laclede’s Market Landing when Papa caught a man cheating. Harsh words were exchanged and fists flew. The fight ended with Papa knocking the cheater senseless. Papa thought he had killed the man and tried to flee the scene. A friend of the cheater caught up with Papa and beat him unconscious. The cheater’s friend then tried to run away, thinking that he had killed Papa.

George Jr., believing the same thing, chased him down and beat him unmercifully leaving him for dead. While all of this was happening, a sizable mob had assembled and an attempt was made to place George Jr. into custody. George Jr. escaped his would-be captors by diving into the river and swimming towards the Seigrist houseboat, which was tied up on the other side of the river. As George Jr. swam for his life, his would-be captors began shooting at him. Finally reaching the houseboat, George Jr. was happy to find that he was out of gunshot range. His fright turned to elation and he decided to have a little fun with his tormentors. George Jr. took his fiddle up on the roof of the houseboat. He then began playing and dancing a lively jig. The impromptu concert ended when the angry mob found boats and began following George Jr. across the river. Young George then eluded his adversaries by hiding in an air pocket under the houseboat. He remained there until the furor died and everyone abandoned the search. The Seigrist family then floated their houseboat down the Mississippi River to the mouth of the Arkansas River.