

## CHAPTER III - BACK IN PANAMA, NOW WHAT?



Back in Panama again, my dad tried his hand as a door-to-door salesman peddling blankets for L. B. Price & Company. His career as a traveling salesman was short lived, however, because of my mother's suspicious and jealous nature. In order to convince the lady of the house how pretty the bed would be, he would talk himself into the master bedroom and lay his bedspreads over the housewife's bed. Mama knowing how much Daddy loved the ladies feared that he was laying more than his fancy bed spreads.

Not being able to stand the thought of him spreading a bedspread over another woman's bed, she demanded that he find another job. That's when he started working for Ode Long, clerking in Long's General Store. He was having trouble making ends meet on a clerk's wages so he left Long's General Store and found work with the Joplin Creosote Plant, just outside of Panama,

It was during this time that he bought a small two bedroom house near downtown Panama. The house was in a perfect location for our family. It was only a block from Dad's parents' home and even closer to Long's General Store. To my mother's delight, our little house was only three and a half blocks from Panama School.

### LOOK OUT KINDERGARTEN, HERE I COME

One early morning in September of 1938, my mother spiffed me up in brand new overalls, long sleeved plaid shirt and store-bought shoes. This was her way of preparing me for my first day of kindergarten. Before sending me on my way, she combed my hair for the umpteenth time, gave me a big kiss and remarked what a pretty little boy I was. My first reaction was one of eagerness. School was where the big kids went and I was anxious to join their ranks. As soon as I escaped my mother's embrace, I messed up my sissy looking hair and ran the three and a half blocks to school.

I found my way to kindergarten with little difficulty and I managed to locate Miss Himes. Miss Himes was young, sweet and very pretty. She pointed out my desk and told me what I would be doing in her class. My eagerness gradually dissolved and was replaced by fright. I suddenly had a terrific longing to be home with my mother. Miss Himes informed me that I could not go home. Unless a parent came to get me I would have to stay in school all day. She

then insisted that I go back to my desk and join the other kids in whatever they were doing. Instead, I escaped and hid behind the bookcase. I stayed there until my mother came for me several hours later. After a conference with the school principal and my teacher, my parents agreed that I wasn't mature enough for kindergarten and didn't make me go back.

### I DID BETTER IN FIRST GRADE (BARELY)

Next year, First grade was a little better. The Dick and Jane stories were rather dull and arithmetic was just as boring. I did manage to learn a little, I suppose, because I passed - on condition. So far, the only thing in school that had excited me was the school bell. Every morning each class except kindergarten, lined up outside when the school bell rang. This was great fun. Every day the boys competed for first in line. It was a great honor to be first. The only thing better was to be allowed to ring the bell. Oh how I wanted to ring that bell. Every day I would join those begging for the honor. Usually the teacher's favorite was picked and the teacher usually favored the brightest and best behaved. This pretty well left me out. Eventually I was chosen. Looking back, I figure it must have been a pity-pick.

One day, as we were all lined up prepared to march single file into our classroom, my mind began to wander. This wasn't unusual for me. Teachers could harness my body but not my mind. While standing in line, mentally I would be playing marbles, collecting pollywogs or ringing that big beautiful school bell. As I stood there, the line in front of me began to file into the classroom. I just stood there holding up the line behind me, mentally oblivious of the real world. Suddenly, the school principal startled me as he said "Charles, step on it". Shocked out of my dream world, I looked around puzzled and asked "Step on what?"

### THE BIG BOYS BUILD A GREAT BIG KITE

When I was a first grader, some of the bigger kids decided to build a giant kite. After a conference, they decided that a standard cross stick construction with an eight foot wing span would impress the township. One of these older kids "borrowed" or otherwise obtained material for a frame that we covered with old newspaper. I hesitate to say "we" because my main involvement was "getting underfoot." As the resident "tag along", I was often advised to "listen up" because my Mama was calling.

After the kite was finally built, several arguments began such as where they would fly it, would standard kite string be strong enough, how much tail would be required and who would have the honor of being the first passenger. One of the older boys snickered that Panama boys needed lots of tail, another recommended using fishing tackle because of its extra strength, and the bravest of the brave failed to step forward and volunteer as first passenger. It was decided to test fly the kite before anyone actually attempted to ride it.

The first attempt at flight resulted in the kite nose diving into the ground because it didn't have enough tail. On about the third attempt, sustained flight was achieved. The kite soared, demanding more and more string until there was no more. I don't remember if the string broke or was simply pulled out of the string handler's hands, but the kite definitely became a free agent and the wind carried it well out of our township. Every boy there was happy that they had not volunteered to be the first passenger.

### LITTLE ERVIN, MY BIRTHDAY PRESENT

I was in the second grade when my younger brother was born. He was born on March 19, 1940 and was named Luther Ervin, Junior, after my Dad. His birth came just two days short of my seventh birthday. Mama told me that my new little brother was a birthday present just for me. Early on every one called him, "Little Ervin" but after a few years this was shortened to just "Ervin". Since he was my baby brother, I usually called him "Baby". Now, years later, my baby brother prefers being called Luke. It's an old joke I know, but as a birthday present, I would have preferred a pony.

### I WASN'T READY FOR PROMOTION

My first grade conditional pass turned out to be a mistake because it took me two years to master second grade skills. One reason for this was because my favorite subjects were recess and dusting blackboard erasers. For recess, we were allowed to go outside and do pretty much as we chose. My favorite activity was playing "holey tag" with marbles. We would dig several tea cup size holes each about ten feet away from the one preceding it.

The game started by lagging a marble to see who went first. Lagging is tossing a marble from a line about 20 feet from the first hole. Each of the players tosses his marble, and the kid whose marble was the closest to the first hole was entitled to go first. The second closest went second and so on. The players would then shoot their marbles from hole to hole until they finally made it to the last hole. Each player tried to make it to the last hole by using the other holes or playing off of an opponent's marble. Any time a marble landed in a hole or struck another opponent's marble, the shooter was entitled to a bonus turn. When a player made it to the last hole, his marble was then called "poison." If a poisoned marble hit another marble, the owner of that marble was out of the game. The shooter with the last surviving marble was the winner.

We also played "Red Rover," "Bum, Bum, Here I Come," "Ring around the Rosy," "London Bridge is falling down", and Dodge ball, but "holey tag" was my favorite. My absolute favorite school pastime was dusting the chalkboard erasers. It wasn't as much fun as the recess games, but dusting the erasers gave me extra time away from the class room. It also made me feel special. It was a way of showing my teacher how much I loved her.

### AUNT ELIZABETH'S SISTER IN LAW

I spent two years in the second grade with the same teacher. Her name was Miss Ward the first year and Mrs. Mosley the next. She married Mr. Mosley during the summer break. I loved all of my teachers, especially Mrs. Mosley. I felt a special tie with her because she was my Aunt Elizabeth's sister-in-law. Not long after she and Mr. Mosley got married, I took it upon myself to pay them a visit. As luck would have it, I showed up just as they were sitting down to lunch. They invited me in and asked if I would join them. I accepted their invitation and sat down to a delicious meal. Everything was enjoyable especially the English peas. I really loved English peas and went back for seconds a couple of times. After lunch, I left them and headed toward

Grandma Ragains to see what was happening at her house. It was one of those awfully hot summer days that Oklahoma is famous for, and I started feeling the effects of the sun. My head was feverish, and my eyes were aching from the glare of the sun. I felt a desperate need to find shade but there was none. I finally positioned myself in the shadow of a telephone pole to give me a little protection from the glaring sun. I finally broke away from my sliver of shade and made it the rest of the way to Grandma's house. Grandma made me drink a lot of water and put cold towels on my head until my temperature broke. It was an awful experience. I blamed it all on those damned peas. I wasn't able to eat a pea for over fifty years after that incident.

### WALKING TO SCHOOL

One of the biggest problems I had with school was actually getting there. In the early years, Bill and I would walk to school together. As we covered the few block from our house to the school house we would talk about things that boys talk about, play tag or just simply annoy each other. One day we were investigating a big ditch that the WPA was digging for some reason or another. The Work Project Administration, or the WPA, was a federal work program that was created just to give men jobs. It was one of many programs created to help pull our country out of the depression. Projects like that ditch were often created so that that the workers could return another day and fill them up. As we were walking by this ditch, one of us decided it would be cute to push the other one in. As the one being pushed was falling, he grabbed a hold of the other one and drug him in with too. I tried to climb out only to have Bill pull me back in. Then Bill tried to climb out and I pulled him back in. Both of us were determined to be the first out by denying the other one that honor. This entire ruckus aroused the curiosity of the school principal, who came out to see what was going on. He made us leave each other alone long enough for us both to get out. He then marched us both to his office. He had me take a seat in his outer office and invited Bill into his inner chambers. Bill wasn't in there very long and I could hear, "whack, whack, whack" Bill was getting "swats." They were hard ones, too. I know they hurt but Bill took his licking without a peep. Now it was my turn. The principal had a great big paddle in his hand. It was obvious that he was going to use it on me. As he drew his hand back, getting ready for his first swing, I couldn't help it but I started shouting, "oh, oh, oh" with each "oh" being a little louder than the one preceding it. When the paddle finely reached its target, I was utterly silent. The principal was tittering a bit at my antics but was determined to complete the punishment. He drew his hand back for a second swing and in anticipation I started going, "oh, oh, oh," again and the principal lost it. He started laughing so loud that he was unable to swing his instrument of torture. He ordered me out of his office and told me to go to my class room. That was to be my one and only experience with "swats" at school.

### NO, BILL WASN'T TRYING TO KILL ME

It's a wonder that Bill and I never killed each other. I'm not talking murder you know. It would have been simple manslaughter. We both loved each other and wouldn't dream of hurting each other on purpose. It was just that we never put much thought into our play. Bill, "Red" Stephens and I were playing near Grandma Ragains house one afternoon when "Red" found one half of a pair of sharp-pointed barber shears. "Red" started tossing the otherwise useless instrument into the air trying to make it stick into the ground. Just making it stick was easy if you held it right and tossed it straight down. That wasn't a challenge at all. Throwing it up in

the air, making it flip over a couple of loops, and then having it stick in the ground was the real challenge. Bill and “Red” were pretty good about taking turns between them, but because I was merely an annoying “tag along,” my turns were rare, only now and then just to shut me up. Bill’s last toss came almost straight down and stuck in the top of my head. I ran straight to Grandma’s screaming bloody murder. Grandma removed the pointy scissor from my head and sent Bill and “Red” off to fetch “Old Doc” Collins, who lived only about a block and a half away. He arrived at Grandma’s house right away. He cleaned the wound, dabbing and poking at it a lot with cotton. He then put a dressing on it and declared that I would live. Since I couldn’t see what he was doing with all of the dabbing and poking he was doing, I had to use my imagination to know what was going on. I thought he had stuffed my head with cotton. I wondered for a long time why he never called me into his office to remove it.

### MY TONSILECTOMY

According to Mama, I started out in this world as a regular little butterball. She said that my period of good health was short lived, that it was interrupted by a parade of diseases that included mumps, measles, chicken pox, asthma, and tonsillitis. I don’t remember any of them except for tonsillitis. I was a frequent visitor to “Old Doc” Collins office because my tonsils were a constant swollen mess. “Old Doc” Collins had Mama take me to the hospital at Fort Smith and have them yanked out. We caught the Greyhound Bus and rode it to downtown Fort Smith. From the bus depot, we walked the dozen or so blocks to the hospital. At the hospital we found our way to the surgeon that had been selected to remove my inflamed tonsils. He explained the procedure. He said that I would be given ether and wouldn’t feel a thing except a sore throat, when I woke up. He then left me with a nurse, who prepped me for surgery. In the operating room, they stuck a rubber thing over my face and told me to start counting backwards from one hundred. One hundred, ninety nine, ninety eight.... I don’t think I reached ninety eight. The last thing I remember was the illusion of spinning around and around at a high velocity. It was horrifying. I’ll never consent to ether again.

After I woke up from the operation, Mama and I walked back to the Greyhound Terminal to catch the bus back to Panama. Even though I was fully awake, the effects of the ether made my head feel as if it weighed a ton. It was all but impossible for me to hold my head upright. I could hold it in a “heads up” position for only a second or two, and it would flop over onto one of my shoulders.

Back in Panama the next day, I was playing my sore throat card for all it was worth. For awhile, Mama rewarded my complaining was with a chip of ice to suck on. The ice chip was helpful but not very. She then gave me a nickel so that I could buy a Popsicle to suck on. After this pattern repeated itself several times Mama decided it would be better to give me a whole dollar so that she wouldn’t have me nickeling her to death.

There are a lot of things a kid could do with a whole dollar back in those days. The average wage was something like 25 cents a day. Instead of wasting my dollar on ice treats for my throat, I would use it as admission to the Poteau Municipal swimming pool. Afterwards I would have enough money left over for a shopping spree at the local 5 & 10 Cent Store. I covered almost 20 miles on this little adventure. I covered about half that distance walking and the other half by hitching rides. I don’t remember my throat hurting after that.

It took years, helped by inflation, before I saw that kind of money again. I felt rich with just a nickel or a dime in my pocket back in those days. The movies only cost a nickel back in the late thirties. Panama built a new theatre in 1940 and admission for kids went up to a dime. Going to the movies was a privilege that Bill and I enjoyed about once a week. Movie prices held firm for several years after that except for the 20% added wartime luxury tax. The 10¢ child ticket went up to 12¢, and the 25¢ adult ticket rose to 30¢.

### VASELINE COATED PENIS

I also visited “Doc” Collins complaining about my penis. I had a tendency for getting yeast infections and my penis would burn like crazy. The reason for my frequent infections was I had never been circumcised and didn’t clean myself often enough. In the summer I only bathed about once a week. In the winter I hardly ever bathed. That was because we didn’t have indoor plumbing and water had to be carried from a neighbor’s well. The Doctor advised better hygiene and recommended coating it with Vaseline. This seemed to work pretty good but not one hundred percent. One day I was up at Grandma Ragains house and my penis started to burn a bit, so I asked Grandma Ragains if she had any Vaseline. She said yes, that I would find some in her medicine chest. Not being all that observant, I mistook the Mentholatum salve jar for the Vaseline jar. That was a big mistake. It burned so bad that I could hardly stand. I screamed in pain and took off running around the house. Aunt Margaret took off after me hollering for me to stop and asking what was wrong with me. She never did catch up with me. The hurt finally subsided enough for me to stop and tell Grandma and Aunt Margaret what my problem was. Aunt Margaret told me that I shouldn’t put Mentholatum on my penis. I didn’t have the heart to tell Aunt Margaret that I had come to that conclusion all on my own.

### THE LONGEST HALFTIME EVER

By the third grade, my world was beginning to expand. That’s when I first heard of a marvelous rough and tumble sport called football. To hear the old folks talk, the greatest football team in the world was called the Arkansas Razorbacks. The Arkansas Razorbacks came from someplace about a million miles from Panama. I knew of Poteau, our county seat, and had even been there a couple of times. I’d also visited Fort Smith but except for the walk to the hospital and back, I didn’t remember much about it. I knew there was a big city called Tulsa because of the radio. The only radio station we could pick up was KVOO in the Phil-Tower, Tulsa. Fort Smith and Tulsa were real big towns. People said that they were a lot bigger than Poteau. It was hard to imagine a town bigger than Poteau.

Our school had a pretty good football team. They called themselves the Panama Razorbacks after the great University of Arkansas Razorbacks. There was great excitement because our school was going to play some Indian school. The talk making its way around the school grounds was that these Indians were a bunch of ferocious savages. Their players were supposed to be much bigger than ours, and they all hated white people with a vengeance. It was also said that they were ignorant of white people’s ways, and had to stay in school a long, long time because of their ignorance. A person had to be very brave to take the field against these savages.

Our school let us out early so that we could see the big game. When the visiting team arrived, I was surprised to see that their team looked pretty much like our team except for the color of their jerseys. To me they didn't even look like Indians.

My friend Bobby Clayton and I watched for a while but quickly became bored with the game and started making our own fun. I don't readily recall exactly what we did but playing was much better than watching and so we played something imitating what we had seen on the field.

In football, they have a thing called halftime where the players go inside some building and rest up for the rest of the game. While resting, they talk about their mistakes and make new plans, stuff like that. Well, sir, going in for rest up time was a big mistake. The opposing teams went inside but they left the ball outside and it was the only ball they had. Both Panama and the Indian school had tight budgets, the balls were made out of real pigskin and cost a lot of money in those days.

Bobby and I recognized the game ball as superior to whatever it was we were playing with. We abandoned our make-do substitute and started playing with the precious game ball. We tossed it back and forth for a while. Since school was out and it was a hot, sweltering day, we decided to toss our way to our favorite swimming hole.

Some time later, one of the townsmen caught up with us and relived us of the ball. He informed us very sternly that the game was on hold awaiting the return of the ball. I have no idea as to how the game turned out. Bobby and I quickly forgot about football and went swimming.

### MAMA'S DREAM

A few years after my brother's frightening experience with the highway, I had a couple of misadventures in the same place. When I was about seven, Santa Claus gave both Bill and me shiny new bicycles for Christmas. Bill had excellent coordination and mastered his bike almost immediately. He was peddling all over town, showing off his new found skills, while I was busy running into anything foolish enough to get in my way.

My main problem was my inability to keep my feet on the pedals. No matter how hard I tried, my feet would slip off the pedals. Somehow, I just couldn't seem to get the hang of it. I spent most of my time watching my feet instead of where I was headed. With stubborn determination I finally managed to make a little progress. Not wanting to be left behind, I followed Bill up to the highway and experienced my first head on collision with car. The car wasn't going very fast, but it was going fast enough for the impact to hurl me over the top of the car landing me safely on his trunk. Except for a scratch or two, no real harm came to me, the car, or my new bike.

When Mama received the news of my accident, she checked me over to make sure I was alright. She then told me that she had seen the accident exactly as I had described it in a dream the previous night. About a week later Mama had another dream about me, my bike and another collision. This dream, just like the first one also came to pass. A few nights after my second accident, Mama dreamed her dream a third time. This dream did not come to pass, like the other two, because Mama took my bike away from me, and I never saw it again.

I am sure that I would not be alive today if Mama had not dreamed her dreams. Mama's prophetic demonstration convinced me that God speaks to us through our dreams. Unfortunately, I'm usually not a very good listener.

### THE EXCITING HIGHWAY CHASE

It is funny how people are drawn to danger. I remember one hot summer day when almost everyone in Panama assembled up on the highway. The word was that a fugitive had been spotted just outside of Fort Smith and was heading towards neighboring Spiro. Spiro is another small town, much like Panama that sits midway, on the highway between Panama and Fort Smith. Back in the late 30s and early 40s very few homes had telephones, and those who did have a telephone were on a party line. Every little town of any size at all had a central telephone operator. The telephone office was usually in the operator's house, and the operator and an assistant or two manned the switchboard 24 hours a day.

There were no telephone numbers, as we know them today. In those days, instead of numbers, everyone on a party line was assigned a "ring code." The caller would make all of the telephones on the party line ring by turning a crank. The more the caller turned the crank, the more the phones on the party line rang. If I remember correctly, Mama Sterling's "ring code" was two shorts and a long. If her telephone rang two shorts and a long it meant that someone on her party line wished to speak with her. If it was something different, it meant someone else was receiving a call. Curiosity being what it is, everyone on the party line usually picked up. There were no private conversations on the party line. On this day one of the Fort Smith telephone operators called the Spiro Operator with the news that a black sedan was headed their way with several police cars in hot pursuit. The Spiro Operator promptly notified the Panama Operator, who passed the news to every phone owner in our little town. The phone owners notified everyone else and the entire town flocked to the highway to see what all the commotion was about. The show was short lived but long talked about. The outlaw and his pursuers zoomed through our little town and the show was all over. I've often wondered how many other little towns lined the highway that day because of the telephone operators passing the news from town to town.

### HOBO JUNGLE

The heart of Panama was an area known as downtown. Downtown consisted of several commercial buildings, strung out over a two block area, along Main Street. This area was made up of two general stores, a post office, a drug store, a café, a soda parlor, a movie theater, two barber shops, a hardware store, a resale store, a doctor's office, a bank and a jail house. Along the highway, to the west of downtown Panama, you would find two gas stations, a skating rink, another cafe and the Greyhound Bus Station. On the east side of downtown Panama there was a saw mill, a creosote plant, and the train depot.

Next to the railroad tracks that ran east and west along the southern edge of Panama, there was an ill defined area that my brother Bill and I called the "hobo jungle." A lot of people were out of work during the great depression and many of these desperate men rode the rails from



town to town looking for work. Broke and jobless they would make camp on the outskirts of towns such as Panama and go door to door offering to work for food.

Bill and I were fascinated with these homeless vagabonds. They were full of interesting stories about where they came from and where they were going. Most of these social derelicts were looking for honest work and a little dignity. They would usually invite Bill and me to share a meager meal with them. Their offering didn't usually amount to much, but it was all they had. Bill and I would usually scamper off to Mama Ragains house and beg on their behalf. Mama Ragains would send us back to their camp with a big sack filled with coffee, sugar, potatoes, homemade biscuits and sometimes a small slab of salt pork. Thanks to my grandmother, their meager offering would be transposed into a real feast.

### BILL'S THIRD MISHAP

If you followed the railroad tracks for about a quarter of a mile west of the Hobo Jungle, you would come to the overpass. The overpass was where the main highway crossed over the railroad tracks just south of town. Bill and I loved playing tag on this manmade highway structure. One part of the overpass sloped for about twenty feet, ending in a sheer drop off of another twenty feet. One day Bill and I were playing tag on this especially dangerous area of the overpass when I ran down the slope with Bill hot on my tail. I turned sharply at the bottom of the slope and scampered on to safe ground. Bill wasn't so lucky. He was going too fast, and being less agile than me, was unable to stop or turn. His only choice was to jump. His feet were broken up so bad that he couldn't walk for several months. His feet eventually healed well enough so that he could walk, but from that day forward, he could never catch me again.

### BILL'S FOURTH MISHAP

Bill had another accident not far from the overpass. Billy Floyd Whitaker, "Red" Stephens, my brother Bill and I were riding from Shady Point to Panama in the back of Uncle Frank's pickup truck. Billy Floyd had a bottle of Leech glue, the miracle product of the day. After expounding the virtues of this wonder product for most of our journey, Billy Floyd told Bill he could have the bottle of glue if he jumped out after it. With this dare, Billy Floyd tossed the glue and without hesitation, Bill hopped out after it. Bill's forward motion sent him tumbling ass over teakettle down the highway. Uncle Frank, completely oblivious to what was happening, continued on to Papa Ragains' house in Panama. As Frank stopped the truck, we jumped out and ran back to see Bill. Bill met us about half way with glue bottle in hand and a huge knot on the back of his head.

### PANAMA WEATHER

Panama is no stranger to the weather. It gets way too hot in the summer, and I've seen it so cold in the winter that it froze the water bucket inside the house. Bear in mind that back then we didn't have air conditioning and central heating. We had an old coal burning stove for cooking

and heating the house. Of course without coal you could do neither. Once when our coal supply was getting short, it looked as if Dad was going to have to choose between food and coal. Bill and I solved his dilemma by making several trips to the railroad yard and bringing back coal that we “found” along the tracks. Coal laying along side the tracks was fair game and wasn’t considered stealing. The fact that Bill and I spent a lot of time “playing” on the coal cars was ignored. Our tossing coal off of the coal cars so that we could “find” it later was perfectly acceptable. In fact it was rewarded. Since Daddy didn’t have to spend money on coal, he could afford to give us money for the movies every once in awhile.

Summer time was just the opposite. During the summer, I would wear as little as modesty and the law allowed. Summer seemed to be the time for thunderstorms and tornadoes. Tornadoes were especially scary. The adults watched the weather signs carefully and seemed to sense when a tornado was in the area. I remember once when a tornado was in the area, Mama rolled Bill and me up in a feather mattress and stuffed us snugly in her closet. Just after that, Dad decided to build a storm cellar in our backyard. My Aunt Lucille dubbed our storm cellar the “fraddie hole.” From then on we felt a lot safer during tornado season.

## WE GO TO WAR

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was a real shocker. Most of our country wanted to stay out of the war, but the Japanese had given us no choice. We were in it, and we were in it to win. Little flags began appearing in windows all over Panama. Most of these flags had one or more blue stars on a red and white background. Each blue star represented a husband or son, who was in the military. It didn’t take long before some of the blue stars were being replaced by gold ones. A gold star sadly proclaimed that a husband or son had died in the service of his country. Mama and Papa Sterling proudly displayed a three star flag (Uncles Charley, Clyde and Harry). Grandma and Grandpa Ragains displayed a two star flag (Uncle Frank and Aunt Margaret’s husband, Uncle Ira). Thank God all of their stars remained blue.

Shortages and rationing soon became a way of life. You couldn’t just walk into a store and buy anything you wanted anymore. Butter, meat, sugar margarine and gasoline were all rationed. Margarine, when you could find it looked like a block of white lard. It had to be mixed with yellow food coloring to make it look like butter. Most motorists were allotted four gallons of gas a week and they had to go before a board before they were allowed to buy a new tire and inner tube. Those who worked in an industry critical to the war effort were entitled to a little bit more.

Early on the ladies had to give up nylons as their contribution to the war effort. Painting a line on the back of their legs to simulate a seam became the smart thing to do. Buying war bonds also became the rage. The cheapest war bond sold for \$18.75 and was redeemable in ten years for \$25.00. At school we were encouraged to buy savings stamps. Our first stamp purchase came with a savings book. When you bought enough stamps to fill your book, you could trade it in for a war bond. Our school also organized a big scrap drive. Our classroom competed against the other classrooms to see which class could round up the most scrap metal and old rubber tires. Tires were the most fun. They could be rolled from their place of discard to the mountain of rubber on the school yard. Old worn out tires were favorite toys back in those days. One kid would curl up inside a tire, and another kid would roll him. The more daring would ride their

tire down a steep embankment. Tires also served as excellent single rope swings. The inner tube became an important part of one of our favorite toys. Inner tubes made from real rubber could be cut up into strips about ¼th inch wide and used as ammunition for home made rubber guns. The elasticity of real rubber allowed it to be stretched several times its relaxed length. When released, this strip of rubber would fly through the air with great force. A one inch thick piece of scrap lumber was best for making these homemade rubber guns. This piece of scrap would then be cut into a capital L design. The shorter part of the L served as the pistol grip and the long portion served as the barrel. A spring powered clothes pin, attached to the grip, served as the firing mechanism. This simple contraption was ideal for playing cowboys and Indians or cops and robbers but it was totally unsuitable for playing war. When war games came into vogue, we lengthened and notched the barrel. A string was attached to the end of the barrel and run back to the grip. Our ammunition, the strips of inner tubing, would then be stretched, one by one from the end of the barrel to the nearest notch in the barrel, being sure that the string is resting between the notch in the barrel and the tightly stretched strip of rubber tubing. The clothespin was not used in this design. The string served as the firing mechanism. The first one made was a marvel, and soon every kid in town had to have a rubber machine gun.

### LIGHTNING STRUCK

My biggest scare in life came when Mom, Dad, Bill and I were struck by lightning. I remember it as being a beautiful day, with hardly a cloud in the sky. We were all alone in the garden gathering cucumbers one minute, and next thing I knew Bill, Mom and I was regaining consciousness. The lightning bolt had rendered us all unconscious and almost killed Dad. When I came too it seemed as if everyone in the entire town was in our yard. They were hovering over us and asking if we were all right. Dad was still unconscious. He was slobbering and pawing the ground. Old Doc Collins was working over him, trying to save his life. After what seemed the longest time, my Dad began to show signs of recovery. The doctor said that the rubber soles of the shoes he was wearing probably saved Dad's life. This horrible experience resulted in an irrational fear of electricity that that has followed me all of my life.

### SUMMER FUN

Panama was a wonderful place in the summer. Summer meant that we didn't have to wear shirt, shoes, or even underwear for that matter. All we wore was a raggedy old pair of overalls. On really hot days, a small gang of us would visit all of our favorite swimming holes. This gang was made up of my brother, "Red" Stephens, Billy Floyd Whitaker, who were all about the same age, and me as a tag along. The first on our list was usually Branson's Pond, which wasn't really a pond at all. It was an area that had been bulldozed, by the Federal Government, to create a watering hole for Mr. Branson's cows. This little mud hole was shallow at one end and very much over my head at the other. This was where I came close to drowning more than once. My brother Bill would order me to stay down at the shallow end, where I would be safe, but he would stay at the deep end where he could really swim. I couldn't stand being left out and would join Bill at the deep end. Minutes later I would be fighting for my life only to have Bill save me at the last minute.

From there, we headed for the little creek that was next to the railroad bridge called Second Culvert. This little creek had nice clear water. It was deep enough to splash around in but too shallow for diving. We would usually stop off there just long enough to cool off a bit. Our next

stop would usually be Brazil Creek. From there, we would swing by the Stephens place, just north of Shady Point. The Stephens had lived in Panama, next door to Grandma and Grandpa Ragains, but they moved to Shady Point after their house burned down. I looked forward to these stopovers because I had a crush on “Red’s” little sister, Edith. The Stephens owned around forty hens and one rooster. Edith’s household chores included feeding the chickens and gathering eggs. I loved helping her with her chores. Bill and I would then go into town with “Red” and trade the eggs for things such as salt, sugar and flour.

### DRAGGING BRANSON’S POND

One of our swimming outings gave Panama more excitement than the town really cared for. Bill and I headed out one morning and visited several of our old familiar swimming holes. Later one of our friends decided to seek us out and join us. He headed straight for Branson’s Pond, hoping to find us there. Not finding us there, he went back to Panama. While at the pond, he had noticed a raggedy old tee shirt that someone had discarded. He sought out the Sheriff and reported this observation. The Sheriff jumped to the conclusion that Bill and I had drowned. The Sheriff quickly sounded the alarm and organized a team to “drag” all of our swimming holes in hope of finding our dead bodies.

Bill and I were completely oblivious to all of this excitement. We were walking along the highway, returning to Panama, when a car speeding the other way came to a screeching stop. He backed up until he was even with us and yelled, “Are you the Sterling boys?” Without waiting for an answer he continued, “Get in.” After a few minutes, he managed to compose himself enough to tell us that the whole town was out looking for us. Bill and I got into the man’s car and he drove us home. My mother was overjoyed that Bill and I were alive, and we were smothered with hugs and kisses.

### PEACH TREE TEA

It wasn’t all hugs and kisses with my mother. She wasn’t big on discipline, but when she felt it necessary she would resort to “peach tree tea”. She introduced me to “peach tree tea” at an early age. I don’t recall what mischief I was involved in but I do remember Mama giving me the choice between discontinuing my behavior and “peach tree tea.” Being slow to get the point and thinking that peach tree tea was a delicious iced tea drink, I made the mistake of asking for a serving. I watched with keen interest as Mama went out to the peach tree and selected a branch about three feet long. She then started to switch my backside. I let out a yelp and took off running.

Running was another mistake on my part and another lesson to be learned. Mama caught up to me with little effort and started switching my behind again. She informed me that anytime I misbehaved she would switch me all the way back to the house. From that moment on I tried to confine my misadventures, or, at least, their discovery, to as close to home as possible.

I don’t remember Mama ever spanking me after that. Even then, she never really hurt me. Being a coward is part of my nature. I’ve always been quick to let others test the waters, and I learned early on that pain hurts. Even a little pain hurts a little, and I wanted no part of it. From that time forward the mere mention of “peach tree tea” got my attention, and I did my best to play the part of Mr. Goody Two Shoes.

For a long time, I thought “peach tree tea” was a lesson that my mother had dreamt up just for my benefit. Years later, in a paper written by my Aunt Dorothy, I learned that this disciplinary lesson was favored by both my Grandmother Ragains and her mother, my Great Grandmother Sims. One can only guess as to how many generations this tradition goes back.