

CHAPTER IV - EARLY ROLE MODELS



Ragains with Jacks

GRANDPA RAGAINS

One of the biggest influences in my life was my grandfather, Frank Ragains. My number one ambition in life has always been is to be loved by my children and grandchildren as much as my Grandpa Frank Ragains was loved by his children and grandchildren.

Frank Ragains was born August 4, 1884 in Elvira Township, Johnson County, Illinois. He died April 26, 1959 in Fort Smith, Arkansas. He was a wonderful old man and has a special place in my heart. He chewed tobacco, loved good whiskey and had a crude but childlike sense of humor. He loved the off-colored stories and the dirty little ditties that seemed to delight us kids.

“There was a peckerwood on the schoolhouse door that pecked and pecked till it’s pecker got sore” was the beginning of one of his little ditties. Another went something like, “There was a bull in the furrow, ho, a long time ago, ho. He bucked and he snorted, he shit and he farted, a long long time ago, ho.” Still another went something like, “Listen, listen, the cats a’ pissin’, Where? Where?, Under the chair. Run, run, get the gun. Woops, too late now, now it’s all done.” These nasty little tidbits were always followed by giggles from us and a hearty guffaw from Grandpa.

Grandpa Ragains had once been the Depot Agent at nearby Bokoshe but had lost that position because of the Depression. Losing his railroad job, he fell back on farming as a way to make ends meet. The only crop I remember them talking about was corn. Grandpa loved good whiskey, and he kept his favorite moonshiner supplied with quality corn for the promised return of several gallons of good corn whiskey. Life was good on the farm, but even so Grandpa was a telegrapher at heart and he missed working for the railroad.

GRANDPA RAGAINS MOVES TO PANAMA

As luck would have it, the position of Depot Agent opened at Panama. Grandpa Ragains happily sold his farm on Bokoshe Mountain moved his family to Panama. Aunt Margaret and Aunt Dorothy were still living with Grandma and Grandpa when they made the move. Aunt Elizabeth, my mother Emma Louise, Aunt Katherine and Uncle Frank were all married and making their own way.

As Panama's Depot Agent, Grandpa Ragains spent most of the time sitting at his desk communicating with other telegraphers up and down the line. My brother Bill and I found the chatter of the telegraph key fascinating. Much to our delight, Grandpa had a "practice" key that he let me and my brother play with. I could manage a click - click - click but that's about all. All my clicks sounded the same to me. I was told, by my older and wiser brother, that a "short" click was a dot and a "long" click was a dash. My brother also explained that these dots and dashes are combined to make letters and that these letters formed words. This knowledge didn't help me much. Try as hard as I could, all of my clicks sounded the same. On the other hand, Grandpa Ragains could make his telegraph key sing. He could actually send messages with a telegraph key, faster than most people could talk. He was also the fastest two-finger typist I ever saw.

Grandpa also "walked the tracks" every day. He would let me tag along whenever I was at the depot. I just loved it. I would run ahead and call out the serial numbers of the cars for Grandpa to write down.

The company Grandpa worked for owned all the tracks around Panama, but these tracks were used by all the other railroad companies that did business in the area. When Grandpa walked the tracks, he copied the serial numbers of each and every railroad car sitting on his company's tracks. He telegraphed this information to the Midland Valley headquarters, in Muskogee. The Midland Valley would then bill the other railroad companies for the time their cars spent on their companies tracks. Walking the tracks with Grandpa was an opportune time to talk to him about personal delicate matters.

CRACKERS AND RAISINS

One such matter was my bed-wetting problem. No matter how hard I tried not to, I would flood my bed every night. At first Grandpa Ragains made a little joke about my problem. With a chuckle, he suggested that I tie a string around it every night. Then in all seriousness, he came up with a real solution. Eat lots of soda crackers and don't drink anything before going to bed. In theory, the dry soda crackers would absorb the moisture in my system and I would be saved from wetting the bed that night. Almost in the same breath, he told me that eating raisins would make my "tallywacker" grow. I spent the next several weeks running around town with one pocket full of raisins and the other stuffed with soda crackers. In case you are wondering, neither worked.

Grandpa also had solutions that involved salt. He gave me a few pennies, some nickels and a dime or two. He then told me to place my nest egg in a small dish, sprinkle it with salt and leave it be. "Salt your money away and it will grow," he advised me. Over the next several days, my nest egg grew as if by magic. Unbeknownst to me, Papa was making daily contributions to my growing treasure. The pennies turned into nickels, the nickels into dimes and the dimes into quarters. Unfortunately, my experience with thriftiness didn't last very long. The candy counter at Whitaker's General Store was simply too tempting. Grandpa also convinced me that sprinkling salt on a bird's tail would make it catchable. I spent days chasing birds with a salt shaker in hand. Each time I approached a bird, it would fly before I could see if the promised magic really worked.

SEED MONEY

Grandpa also introduced me and my brother to the world of commerce. He staked us with seed money and set aside a garden plot for us to farm. My brother bought watermelon seed with his money. Grandpa was delighted and offered Bill a quarter for each melon that measured the size of his head. I spent my money on roasting ear corn seed. As luck would have it, Bill's crop failed and mine flourished. I harvested my bumper crop of corn. I peddled my corn door to door, selling it three ears for a dime. The joy I felt from earning money by the sweat of my brow was wonderful but it quickly vanished. My brother' seeing all the money I had earned, insisted that we were partners and made me split the profits with him. It just didn't seem right. Splitting my profit with Bill made his failure just as rewarding as my success. It wasn't right, but I reluctantly agreed to give Bill one half of all my money. I figured Grandpa would think better of me if I shared.

MY LEMONADE BUSINESS

I also had a lucrative lemonade business with Grandpa as my only customer. Every day I would take a jug of fresh ice-cold lemonade to the train depot where Grandpa worked. Grandpa would make a big fuss over it and give me a quarter for my effort. I would then take my quarter to Whitakers', buy lemons for the following day and spend what was left on candy. Everything except for the money I spent on lemons was pure profit because Grandma was kind enough to supply ice and sugar for my operation. She monitored my operation because she wanted to make sure that I didn't accidentally poison Grandpa.

THE NICKLE CANDY BAR

When I was about ten years old, Grandpa gave me a shiny dime for running an errand. How long a dime stayed in my pocket usually depended on how far I was from Whitaker's General Store. A nickel would buy a real big candy bar back in those days and here I was doubly blessed. I had enough money for two big candy bars. I ate the first bar right away, and having satisfied my sweet tooth for the moment, I decided to hide the second bar and save it for my future pleasure.

Unfortunately, the hiding place I chose was the pocket of the coat I wore on chillier days. I then hung my coat in its assigned place, along side all the other coats at the front entrance of my grandparent's home. I felt confident that I had found a safe place for my chocolate treat. Everything would have been all right except for my Aunt Margaret.

She noticed the slight bulge in my coat pocket, made by my candy bar. Overcome by curiosity, she investigated and discovered my hidden treasure. To her credit, she left my chocolate bar where she found it, but then she did the unforgivable. She told my cousin Albert Ray about my stash. She didn't tell him intentionally, mind you, but she told him none-the-less. Actually, she told my grandmother, in front of Albert Ray, that "Charles has a c-a-n-d-y b-a-r in his coat pocket." She correctly assumed that my two-year-old cousin couldn't spell but had underestimated his ability to reason. Albert Ray figured it all out by looking in my coat pocket. I learned two valuable lessons that day. Never underestimate the intelligence of a two-year-old and never trust a snoopy aunt.

OLD JOE

There was nothing that my Grandpa hated more than the abuse of an animal. My other grandfather, Papa Sterling, bought or otherwise acquired a beautiful German shepherd. I don't remember what Papa Sterling called him but even though he was still a pup and there wasn't anything old about him, my brother Billy and I started calling him Old Joe.

Old Joe loved to run, go places and get into stuff much the same as Billy and I did. It wasn't long before we were constant companions. Grandma Ragains was in the habit of cooking several pans of biscuits every day. Billy and I quickly discovered that Old Joe had a sweet tooth for Grandma's biscuits. We'd throw them one by one high as we could, and Old Joe would catch and devour them with a single gulp. Spending all this time at Grandma Ragains house, feeding Old Joe biscuits and getting into whatever caught our fancy, sort of confused Old Joe. He got to thinking he was a Ragains dog and not a Sterling dog.

Papa Sterling objected to Old Joe thinking he was a Ragains dog and started tying Old Joe up, to break him of the Ragains habit. As far as Grandpa Ragains was concerned, keeping Old Joe tied up all day was animal abuse in the worse way. He hired Billy and me to set our biscuit craving companion free. Papa Sterling tied Old Joe up again and again, just about every chance he got; only to have Billy and me set Old Joe free again. Freeing Old Joe not only made us feel like daring cavaliers, it was also making us rich with shiny quarters.

Finally, Papa Sterling had had enough. Instead of tying Old Joe up with a rope, he padlocked and chained Old Joe to the barn. After studying the situation carefully, Billy and I "borrowed" Papa Sterling's chopping axe and proceeded to chop the chain into. Not only did we sever the chain, but we also ruined Papa Sterling's good chopping axe. Alas, Papa Sterling gave up. Old Joe was no longer a Sterling dog. Old Joe belonged to Billy, me and Grandpa Ragains.

Stealing Old Joe for Grandpa Ragains was a grand adventure for Billy and me. I'll never know for sure but I wouldn't be surprised that somewhere along the line Grandpa Ragains paid Papa Sterling for Old Joe and the ruined chopping axe. The damage Bill and I did to Papa Sterling's axe was nothing compared to what my little brother did to Grandpa Ragains' water well. I keep an old relic reminiscent of this event in a place of honor.

THE POTTY WELL

Not long ago, my wife, Anita, and I were in an antique mall when I spotted a long skinny well bucket that I just had to have. This bucket was a galvanized cylinder about four feet long and about six inches in diameter. It was designed to be lowered down a narrow bore well, fill itself with water. Then the water could be hauled to the surface. A trigger attached to a check valve on the bottom of the cylinder gave the operator control over filling and releasing the water into a "carrying" bucket.

A nostalgic rush filled me as I examined this wondrous relic. It was almost as if a time machine had taken me back to Grandma and Grandpa Ragains house in the Panama of my youth. My younger brother Ervin, was barely potty trained when our family returned to Panama for a visit. Going from Galveston to Panama was something like stepping through a looking glass. Galveston was a city with up to date modern conveniences compared to Panama, a small town, where every one relied on well water and outdoor privies. Our family took these primitive conditions in stride. After all, we were returning to our roots. A big exception to this was my little brother who knew absolutely nothing of wells or outhouses.

Grandma and Grandpa Ragains were renting a modest two-bedroom home with a large kitchen-dining room and a comfortable living room at the time. It was a nice house with a large screened-in back porch. On the porch, next to the rear entrance of the house, there was conveniently placed water well. Most water wells, in Panama, were hand dug and measured several feet in diameter. This was a drilled well, however, and was only about six inches in diameter. The mouth of it stuck up about a foot above the floor and had a little hinged cover to keep bugs and debris from falling into it. In some ways, it looked remarkably like Ervin's little potty-chair.

Needless to say, my grandfather spent the next several days trying his best to empty the well after Ervin was caught doing the obvious. I felt sorry for Grandpa, bless his heart. Except for a bit of cussing under his breath, he never said a word. Not long afterwards, Grandpa moved to another house, closer to the train depot. Some thought that he wanted a shorter walk to work but I suspect the real reason was the water from his old well never tasted quite right after my brother christened it.

SUPER ERVIN

My little brother Ervin is a real big fellow now. His full name is Luther Ervin Sterling Junior. He was born on March 19, 1940 in Panama. He was named after my father, Luther Eurvin Sterling. For reasons that I don't understand, my brother and my dad spelled their middle names differently. Now that Ervin is an adult, he goes by and prefers being called Luke. He grew to about 6'4" weighing well over 200 pounds.

This wasn't always so, of course. Luke was once my little brother, "Ervin," and I was his protector. Protector wasn't always an appropriate title, however. There were times when it was me that my little brother needed protection from.

Hypnotism isn't exactly a new art but when I was ten, it was new to me. I had read about it in comic books and seen it in comedy-horror movies. The hypnotist was usually an evil scientist or a mad doctor with piercing eyes. The hypnotist usually had a small shiny disc that swung back and forth like a pendulum. Then, with a soft soothing voice, he would lull his victim into a hypnotic state. It was both marvelous and mystical. If one could master a little hocus pocus, he could place a subject into a hypnotic trance and command them into doing fantastic feats.

Being seven years younger than me, my little brother was a perfect subject for me to practice on. Wide-eyed and all trusting, my little brother stared at the shiny pendant that I waved before him. "You are getting sleepy," I chanted over and over. After repeating this phrase dozens of times, I finally announced "You are hypnotized." I then told him that he was Superman and ordered him to fly.

Ervin sprang into action. He ran across the full size bed that we were playing on as fast as his little legs could carry him. When he came to the edge of the bed, he leaped into space and for a moment he seemed to soar. For a moment, little brother was indeed Superman. Then with a mighty thump, his tiny little body slammed into the hardwood floor. Ervin then looked up at me with big tears in his eyes he whined "I ain't Superman either!"

GRANDMA RAGAINS

My Grandmother Ragains was wrinkled and frail looking. She had long, glistening black hair and a heart as pure as gold. She was an excellent cook but ate like a bird. She spent her entire life taking care of Grandpa and serving her family. She never set herself a plate at the table but chose to spend meal times serving others. I'll never forget her made from-scratch biscuits and her wonderful blackberry cobbler. Mostly I remember her wonderful loving heart.

Her recipe for blackberry cobbler began by spraying our lower pants legs with kerosene. This was a precautionary action to ward off the pesky little chigger. The chigger is a tiny insect that lives in blackberry thickets just waiting for the opportunity to attack hapless blackberry pickers. They bury themselves deep into the skin of their victim and itch like crazy. Once a person is protected against this annoying insect, it is necessary to go deep into the woods to find the fruitful blackberry thicket. Once found, the thorny entanglement of berries must be approached with great caution. Snakes also love blackberries, and often guard their treasured treat. Once past chiggers, thorns and snakes, the delicious berries are easy to pick. The picking part is easy but the keeping part is hard. More berries usually found their way into my mouth than into the gathering bucket. Our buckets were then taken back and presented to Grandma Ragains. My grandmother would then do her wonderful magic and turn the remaining berries into the most delicious cobbler ever made.

Grandma Ragains was also my most trusted religious adviser. She taught me that I am the only one responsible for my soul. She said that I should go to church, listen to the sermon, look up references in the Bible, and then make up my own mind.

My grandmother Ragains was born Malinda Maude Sims on September 1, 1883 in Dodd, Fannin County, Texas. She died January 5, 1956 in the Arkansas Tubercular Sanatorium at Boonville, Arkansas. As a young girl, she was called Linda but became known as Maude after her marriage to Grandpa Ragains on February 4, 1906 in Custer County, Oklahoma Territory. Oklahoma would not achieve statehood until November 16, 1907. She and Grandpa had six children. They were Elizabeth Maude, Martha Katherine, my mother Emma Louise, Frank Edward, Margaret Ruth and Dorothy Ellen.

PAPA STERLING

My grandfather, William James Sterling was born December 16, 1882 in Excelsior, Arkansas. The little town of Excelsior is about 20 miles as the crow flies, due east of Panama. When his father died, Papa Sterling inherited some land near Calhoun, Oklahoma. Calhoun is just a few miles southwest of Panama. This was long before the Army Corps of Engineers tamed the Arkansas River. I can remember the farmers complaining that if the spring floods didn't get you, the summer drought would. It wasn't unusual to have four failures for every successful crop. The weather was almost always the main topic of conversations around Panama. After back to back crop failures, Papa sold the farm, moved to Panama and thanks to political connections, got a job supervising a county roads maintenance crew.

Le Flore County kept a nice assortment of graders and road repair equipment on a vacant lot next to Papa's house. This was years before I ever saw anything like "monkey bars" or a "Jungle Jim." Papa's assortment of bulldozers and road graders were much more fun to play on. It was good being the grandson of the owner of this magnificent playground. Papa had this job because he was a good friend and political supporter of George Ferguson, the LeFlore County Commissioner. Needless to say, Papa's job depended on Mr. Ferguson being re-elected. My little friends and I had a ball during Mr. Ferguson's bid for reelection. Equipped with tack

hammer and tacks, we plastered George Ferguson's face all over town. It was a lot of fun but sadly, George lost the election and Papa lost his job.

Papa didn't do much after his forced retirement from the County. He put in a garden and raised a few pigs but that's about it. One of his pigs got loose one hot summer day, and Papa hollered at us kids that he would give a quarter to whoever caught it. A quarter was an awful lot of money back in those days. A quarter was enough for admission into the movies with enough left over for popcorn and a couple of candy bars. A quarter was serious money. I wanted that quarter. Unfortunately, the pig wanted its freedom every bit as much as I wanted Papa's quarter. The pig chase started out with half dozen or so of us kids hot in pursuit of the pig. The pig and I soon left the pack behind. We finally wound up in a low-lying wooded area a couple of miles east of Panama. This marshy area had a small creek meandering through it. The pig and I found ourselves on opposite banks of this little creek just staring at each other. After catching my breath, I crossed over onto the pig's side of the stream only to have the pig mock me by crossing over onto my side. This frustrating maneuver was repeated over and over. By this time all the other boys had given up all hope of a reward and had straggled back home. Papa and about half of Panama took off into the woods searching for me. The search party soon caught up with me, still holding my ground with that pig. I think someone corralled the pig but I'm not sure. Papa Sterling made a big fuss over me telling me how grown up I was sticking with the pig and all. He said that a quarter wasn't much money for a grown up like me, and gave me a whole dollar instead. Being recognized as an adult, and earning a whole dollar made me feel very special.

GOOD OLE UNCLE CHARLEY

Uncle Charley was my number one hero for many years. I was named after him just as he had been named after his Uncle Charley before that. Uncle Charley's Uncle Charley was my grandfather's younger brother.

My Uncle Charley joined the Army quite a while before Pearl Harbor and took to the Army like a duck to water. He wound up a Sergeant, with a whole bunch of stripes, and everyone was as proud of him as could be. He had completed his basic training just in time to train others in the massive buildup that followed Pearl Harbor. Every time Uncle Charley came home on leave he would bring a bundle of comic books as presents for my brother Bill and me. After Pearl Harbor, Uncle Clyde and Uncle Harry followed Charley into the service but neither reached the "hero" status that was Uncle Charley's.

One time when Uncle Charley was home on leave, he and his brothers, Clyde and Harry decided to build a giant swing as a special gift for Bill and me. They either bought or stole two telephone poles from the Joplin Creosote Plant and dragged them back to Mama and Papa Sterling's house. They planted the poles about five feet from each other in Papa's front yard. Next they anchored a cross beam to the two poles and secured two ropes to the cross beam. A wooden plank was then added for safety and comfort and the giant swing was ready for testing. Needless to say, our giant swing made Bill and me the most popular kids in Panama.

MAMA STERLING

My grandmother, Mama Sterling, was born Matilda Ann Seigrist on June 4, 1891 in Missouri. She died on September 10, 1964 in Texas City, Texas. Mama and Papa Sterling were married on August 4, 1910 in Talihina, Oklahoma. She was known to the world as "Tillie" but

to the family she was affectionately known as “Mama” or “Big Mama”. Even though my grandmother was a very large woman, Big Mama was definitely more of a title than a physical description. Big Mama had the final say on everything in the family. She reigned over Papa, her four sons and her daughter with an iron fist. Mama Sterling was definitely the matriarch of the family.

BIRD SEED

Mama Sterling used me to run errands a lot. Barring some major distraction such as the smile of a pretty little girl, I could be trusted to run errands such as carrying water or other uncomplicated task. Mama Sterling loved canaries and raised them to supplement the family income. She sold most of her canaries to the local coal mines. Canaries were very sensitive to methane and carbon monoxide. The miners used the canaries as gas detectors. When their canary quit singing and started wobbling on its perch, the miners knew that they only had minutes to rush to the surface or die from methane or carbon monoxide poisoning. Mama Sterling was so pleased that I shared her love for these lovely yellow songbirds that she gave me one. Needless to say, it became routine for me to run to the store and buy bird seed for either her birds or the bird she gave me. My grandparents and my parents along with just about everyone else in town had charge accounts at Whitaker’s General Store. It was the custom at Whitaker’s to charge purchases and settled up at the end of the month.

My grandmother and my mother usually gave me a note when they sent me to the store. Since this was a one item purchase, no note was necessary. After Mr. Whitaker cheerfully bagged the box of birdseed for me and then needing to know which account to charge the bird seed too, he asked who the birdseed was for. “Is this for your mother or your grandmother?” he asked. His question astonished me. “It’s for the birds, silly. My mama and my grandma don’t eat bird seed.” Flabbergasted, Mr. Whitaker let me go my way. Later would be soon enough to figure out who gets the bill.

CATS AND CANARIES DON’T MIX

Already the owner of beautiful yellow canary, I soon became the owner of the sweetest cat I have ever known. This cat simply showed up one day and purred herself into my heart. As it turned, out having both a cat and a canary wasn’t really such a good idea. My sweet purring cat had a taste for songbirds and ate my poor canary, feathers and all. It broke my heart. How could she do that?

In my grief, I felt a strong need for revenge. My cat had to be punished. “I’ll kill you just as you killed my canary,” I cried mournfully, all the time stroking kitty’s soft fur. Kitty began to purr as I tearfully contemplated her fate. “No,” I told her, “I won’t kill you. I’ll wait till you have kittens and then I’ll kill them.”

Sure enough, time passed and kitty did indeed have kittens. By this time my anger had subsided, and I found myself loving her kittens every bit as much as I loved their mother. Mom and Dad didn’t share my enthusiasm for my newfound wealth of cats, however. To them, Kitty was tolerable but her offspring had to go. Remembering the grief I went through when my canary died, my parents decided to dispose of the kittens quietly and blame their demise on an

old tomcat. “Tomcats sometimes do that to baby kittens,” they told me. The grief would be the same but my bitterness would be directed towards the old tomcat and not at them.

Not long after that, I also lost Kitty. She was a mighty huntress and loved killing rodents, birds and other small game. After a successful hunt, she would bring her dead prey and place it at my feet as if to say, “See the wonderful thing I did.”

Our next-door neighbor, Mr. Bevils, was having rat problems in his barn. He had set out several traps trying to get rid of them. Kitty was trying to help Mr. Bevils with his rat problem and accidentally got caught in one of the traps. Mr. Bevils discovered Kitty caught in one of his traps and killed her with a hammer. For years I viewed this act as the meanest of mean. Now years later, I can see that my poor cat was mortally injured and Mr. Bevils had mercifully ended her suffering.