

# ***Back in Time***

***by***

***Sharon Upson Edwards***

Cover illustration by Moira Decking

This book was created as part of *Lifescapes*, a senior writing project sponsored by Washoe County Library System, University of Nevada English Department, and Nevada Humanities.

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Sparks Library Press  
1125 12<sup>th</sup> Street  
Sparks, NV 89431

[www.lifescapesmemoirs.net](http://www.lifescapesmemoirs.net)

## BIOGRAPHY

Sharon Upson Edwards

My father's side of the family lived consistently in both Virginia City and the Reno, Nevada area since the 1860's. This book tells stories and poems about the West; courageous pioneers, who were related to me and stories from childhood.

My interests are reading Lifescapes stories, anthropology, archeology; wild horses, and Native American culture.

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## Sunset on the Trail

As the fiery sun sets slowly in the West, the dusty Conestoga Wagons circled the campfires giving weary travelers a rest.

Bacon sizzles in the pans and aromatic coffee fills the air as all are anticipating this evening meal on the trail.

Weary scouts return from mapping tomorrow's route and one of the many risks that are lurking over the hills.

Campfires are stocked and bedrolls are placed upon the waving prairie grass. These brave souls tired from endless walking, their shoes worn and shabby, finally close their eyes for some needed sleep.

People are silenced by the majesty of the stars twinkling in the evening sky and they ask themselves how far to the end of their rainbow that holds their hopes and dreams of tomorrow.

Nevada has half of the 30,000 wild horses roaming the Western United States. They depict the freedom, the spirit and the perseverance that characterizes the Wild West.

## Running Wild

Thundering hooves churn up the arid desert floor, sending billowing clouds of dust high into the air. These regal Mustangs, a symbol of the American West, soon will be fewer than more.

Rippling muscles, flowing manes and tails, all sizes, shapes and colors, these horses with their untamed spirits race along the well worn trails.

Powerful and majestic, a black stallion stands tall, pawing the air, warning his rivals beware.

Young colts barely able to walk look at the rising sun that produces long hot days ahead for the horses on the run.

Sparse food and dwindling water are hazards they will face to keep their free spirits running wild throughout this splendid place.

## Stop and Smell the Sagebrush

Mile after mile of Nevada is covered with Sagebrush, a brush that has withstood drought, snow, rain, fire, misuse and many more catastrophes. Yet, it always returns to cover the ground again.

When I smell a sprig of sagebrush, it brings back memories of the courage and perseverance of the American pioneer so vividly portrayed in books.

I see Conestoga wagons rolling across the arid desert stretching as far as the eye can see, carry pioneers with dreams for a new beginning. No one was completely aware of the sacrifices that they would have to make to fulfill those dreams and many paid with their life.

Sitting around a blazing campfire at night bone tired, hungry, dusty, sick, and discouraged, no one knew what tomorrow would bring. Yet, they would reach the places of their dreams.

Life then was hard and sometimes life now is hard, but when problems arise and I feel overwhelmed, I stop and smell the Sagebrush, which musters up my courage and perseverance like those unforgettable pioneers. Somehow the long road seems shorter.

## The Pioneer's Spirit

As wind whistled down Mt. Davidson and tumbleweeds were blowing around, another individual was added to the thriving population of Virginia City, Nevada known as the Comstock Lode.

Nicholas Hammersmith came to this town at the age of 19 in 1859 from Germany, stopping briefly in San Francisco to learn the trade of barbering from his uncle. He was my great-grandfather. One of his childhood friends came to Virginia City in 1864 at the age of sixteen and they were married in the Comstock Methodist Church.

Several years later they moved to a new town called Reno along the banks of the Truckee River. He started his business and twice his barbershop burnt down as Reno's few blocks caught fire. Nicholas then moved his shop into his home on First Street. For those of you that remember the Granada Theater, you will know the location, (between NW Sierra on First St.)



My great-grandmother and Great-grandfather Mr. & Mrs. Nicholas Hammersmith. They were married in Virginia City, NV in 1864 and moved to the new Town of Reno shortly after.

My grandparents had ten children, nine of them born in this house on First Street. One of these children Clara Hammersmith Upson became my grandmother. She was born in Reno in 1884 as was her husband Perl W. Upson in the same year.

She told me her father would call roll every meal. I guess hoping no kids go astray. Also, she remembers seeing the hanging of a man from the Wooden Virginia Street Bridge. In those days no one locked their doors and wooden sidewalks wound through the town.

Clara had eight children and one of them was my father. The descendants of the pioneer family have been living in Reno continuously since the 1860's.

Many a tale was told and many hardships along with much happiness had taken place over the years.

How I would have loved to have met my great-grand parents. Their legacy of hard work and honesty were passed down to each generation over time.

Tumbleweeds still blow around, the water still runs down the Truckee River and our heritage is still intact.

## Aromatic Memories

My teeth were chattering as I bounced around in the back seat of my parent's car. We headed down Mill Street and when we passed Washoe Medical Center, nearly the end of town, Mill Street became a bumpy dirt road lined on either side with large cottonwood trees. We were headed to my great aunt's for our yearly anticipated Christmas gift.

Aunt Mamie Hammersmith was married to Jim Steel and they lived on the Steel Ranch in a square, gray unpainted ranch house. They were a childless couple, but my grandmother Upson had eight children and was more than happy to share them with her, hence the large gathering.

This house was a step back in time. It was early 1940's and it had no electricity, no running water and no indoor plumbing. I was eight years old and couldn't understand why Aunt Mamie wasn't civilized. On the wooden drain board an iron hand pump was a miniature replica of the large one outside. All kerosene lamps were cleaned and sparkling, waiting for dusk to set in. I certainly was not impressed with the large outhouse for I absolutely knew if I fell in; it was the end of my life.

They had no car. Their transportation was a horse and buggy. On Saturday she would drive Uncle Jim to the "watering hole" to tip a few and play cards. Upon returning home she would let the horse loose in the onion field.

Returning in the evening for him, she didn't lecture him about his sins that day for she felt riding behind a horse that had eaten onions all day was punishment enough.



My Aunt Mamie Hammersmith Steel in the 1940's in the Steele Ranch House on Mill Street in Reno.

So, the scene is set for this jolly gathering. The parlor doors were flung open twice a year and we all piled into this room. The horsehair furniture was stiff as a board and very scratchy. Working their way

through elegant lace curtains sun rays danced across the floor to the piano, which was probably used once every decade. Truly Victorian, truly magical and we knew we were truly loved.

Every year she made each family unit a delicious three inch high dark fruitcake, wrapped in layers of cheesecloth soaked in so much brandy it made my eyes water. These were our wonderful gifts.

One of my last gifts from Aunt Mamie was a sterling silver napkin ring with an eagle on each side. Inscribed inside was "Aunt Mamie, Dec.24, 1873 to Sharon Dec.24, 1936." When I hold this in my hand many years of aromatic memories bring a smile to my face.

## The One and Only

What a beautiful glass convex frame! Dressed in a delicate batiste dress, long white stockings and dainty shoes, a two year old child stands in a chair posing for a photographer. This child was one of eight children and the picture was taken 95 years ago. I am looking at my father.

He was born in Reno in 1913, and both of his parents were born in Reno in 1884. In the 1870's his grandfather was Constable of Reno. The idea of renting a moving van never occurred to him throughout his life.

A man of integrity, honesty, a hard worker, filled with pioneer perseverance and courage. He was a wonderful role model for his only child named Sharon, born on Christmas Eve. He was very strong, both mentally and physically. With his beautiful tan and school bus yellow swim suit, he was an exact replica of Charles Atlas.

He drove a semi-diesel truck for fifteen years and I often accompanied him on his nightly trips to Winnemucca, Nevada. That highway, sixty years ago, had few trucks and fewer cars, but a thousand jack rabbits. I had the honor of tooting the horn to greet oncoming truckers. He was awarded a million miles safe driving award.



Moving to Terminal Manager without a college education proved he was a man of great sense and intelligence. Pacific Motor Trucking was a branch of Southern Pacific Railroad. The company offered him a very large terminal in California with a large raise to go with it. He refused stating that he was born in Nevada, was raised in Nevada, and he was going to die in Nevada. If they insisted, he would go back to driving a semi.

My father very seldom took a vacation, and when he retired after working for them for 35 years, he fulfilled his dreams of going to Australia and New Zealand several times.

When I was thirteen and it was time to graduate from junior high, an incident happened that made a lasting impression on me. That evening, when he came home from work, tired and hungry, my mother told him about my antics for that day. I was humiliated to get my first spanking from my father – my first and only spanking at thirteen.

Days later or so as I walked into the kitchen, my father was sitting at the table with a small wrapped gift in front of him. He said that he save his lunch money each day for six weeks to get this gift. At this time I wished the floor would open up so I could disappear. I had received my first wrist watch and a lasting impression for the rest of my life.

One of my father's hobbies was lapidary work. He belonged to the Reno Gem and Mineral Society. He was very proud of being an honorary member of all of the Gem and Mineral Societies of Australia and New Zealand. Another of his hobbies was digging up antique bottles throughout Nevada. He had three beautiful antique bottle collections.

The year before my parents both passed away, they celebrated their 70<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary.

On March 14, 2006 as the sun set in the West, sagebrush covered the hills and water flowed down the Truckee River, his Conestoga wagon disappeared over the horizon.

## Someone Watches Over You

Thunder was crashing, lightning was streaking across the sky and rain was pouring down. It wasn't a pleasant evening. It was an evening that was to become unforgettable and etched in our minds forever.

An emergency meeting of the family was called to meet at my grandparent's house that night. I was eight years old and not sure what this World War was about.

As we sat around the dining room table: the lights were off; weird shadows danced on the walls coming from the kerosene lamps. Looking around and seeing the looks on everyone's face told me this evening was not going to get any better.

All eyes were on Grandpa Upson as he read from a telegram. "Missing in Action, Captain Wallace C. Upson" I sat there with wide eyes seeing tears forming in everyone's eyes. Until I was older I would not know what extreme pain and sorrow would feel like.

In a few weeks they notified my grandparents, he was a P.O.W. in a German prisoner of war camp. He would spend a year there. Being half German himself he was not given any special favors, but at least showed more respect.



My Uncle, Wallace C. Upton during WWII and a cousin Harry Upton, Jr.

He returned home and in later years and retired as a Major from the Air force.

He then became an executive with GT and E. He was transferred to Washington D.C. Since GT and E had a contract for the red phone to Russia in the White House, it was the job of my Uncle and others to man it 24/7. He was fortunate enough to travel with President Nixon to China and Yugoslavia.

He spent a number of his retirement years writing a genealogy of his and my father's family back to 1641. Several weeks ago he called me. He is the last of the eight children living and he is in his 80's.

The information he gave me was that he had an incurable blood disease and had eight months to live.

My eyes opened wide and I could hardly breathe. My mind immediately went back to that eerie dining room 63 years ago, and I now know in my later life how everyone felt, sitting silently around that table. The news this day was as startling as it was many years ago.

## The Forgotten Cabin

Incline beach sixty three years ago was a beautiful, beige sandy beach, extending along Lake Tahoe for as far as the eye could see. It was pristine and inhabited by few people. I called it God's country as only he could have created something this magnificent.

There was a campground, a ranger station, a riding stable across the street and an old miner's cabin sitting in a meadow which they sometimes rented out.

We had camped there many times, but my parents decided it would be fun to rent the cabin for a week.

This miner's cabin had black tar paper covering the outside walls and a roof that had seen better days. The window glass was cloudy from old age or perhaps dirt.

Sitting in a lush green meadow blazing with wild flowers, it looked like an artist's painting.

The crooked stove pipe looked as if it had survived many wind storms through many winters. Inside the cabin it was stark and somewhat dark. It had the basic essentials and an added decorating treat of cobwebs. There was no electricity but it did have running water. There was a small, black iron stove for cooking and heating,

There were a few cupboards for holding our food, a table and chairs, several cots and kerosene lamps. This was called "roughing it." I thought it was great for it sure beat tenting and waking up to frost and a chilly morning.

After my Dad had built a fire we settled down and devoured coffee and my Mom's huge cinnamon rolls brought out two mice with noses twitching sniffing the air. My Mom was horrified when I dropped some crumbs for them. I asked her what difference it made, since they were here first and surely weren't leaving anytime soon. Our whole stay they never seem to miss a meal.

My father would hike up Incline Creek and catch enough trout everyday for dinner. There is nothing like brook trout from a cold mountain stream.

Sitting on the step basking in the sun, I would wonder if some miner, trapper or bank robber had ever spent some time in this little cabin as a safe haven. The wild flowers were delicate and seemed to be swaying with the breeze as if they were playing some melody.

Several times, we went horse-back riding into the mountains. My parents always had nice large horses, but I always had to ride a dirty white horse as old as time with a swayback and stomach close to the ground. This certainly dampened my spirits about being a mountain man. But my parents informed me it was safety first and my imagination second.

As everyone knows the water at Lake Tahoe is not particularly warm. It is more like jumping in a bowl of ice cubes. When you started turning blue it was time to wrap up in a towel.

This vacation was a fabulous one. The sun rose in the East and set above the tall mountains in the West. Small waves broke against the beach, creating a scene of peace and serenity, which was good for one's soul.

When we left I said goodbye to the mice by leaving them some crumbs and old fruit. Who knows when the Forgotten Cabin would be rented again?

## Stoney Ridge

In the Lake Tahoe area, there are a number of beautiful mountain lakes hidden in the magnificent forests surrounding this huge lake. Many are difficult to reach. I'm sure many a mountain man of long ago, like Kit Carson, crisscrossed this area numerous times. My father was an avid outdoorsman and very much like Kit Carson. No mountain or lake was too difficult for him to conquer.

So, he invited my Mom, me and several relatives to hike into a remote lake named Stony Ridge behind Zephyr Cove. After parking the car in this area we organized our backpacks. Being only thirteen years old at the time I was not required to carry anything and soon I found out why.

Starting on a narrow trail that went straight up the mountain we discovered this trail was really steep and rarely leveled out. I think it was a pathway for mountain sheep.

Periodically my father would turn around and check on me to see if I was still upright. I would tell him I was fine, but that could have many definitions. I asked him how far this lake was and he replied that it was only five miles.

Being the most proper and well behaved tomboy on the face of the planet, I was not going to appear to be a wimp. Upward and onward we hiked seeing the most beautiful scenery one could imagine.

As we crested the top of a small knoll, there appeared before us a lush green valley covered with a kaleidoscope of colorful wild flowers swaying with the breeze.

It was a small lake with pine trees reaching toward the heavens and huge boulders placed here and there, as if they had been dropped from heaven. Could this place be Shangri La?

Peering into pristine crystal water I saw large trout cruising through the water enjoying the tranquility.

Since we were very high in the mountains, I was looking around for any signs of bears or cougars in need of breakfast.

What a magnificent and wonderful time we had. As I watched my father lay his trout between wet grass in his wicker creel, I knew this was an adventure I would remember for a lifetime.

Going down the trail was far easier than our trek up it and it seemed to take less time.

I sat on a rock exhausted wondering if Kit Carson and other mountain men had felt the exhilaration I did after having been amid such beauty in this wilderness. But, I know for sure I would have never wanted to change places with Kit Carson, even if he had a fringed deerskin jacket.

## Nature's Ice Rink

It was scenic, cold, fun and an adventure one can't forget. In the 1940's we had access to a natural ice rink that provided us with numerous evenings of ice skating fun.

Going down Lakeview hill bordering Little Washoe-lake, we would turn off and take a dirt road down to a small beach. Growing close to this beach was a large statuesque Cottonwood tree. Could it possibly be ancient and have survived a pioneer cutting it down for lumber and heat?

We would build a bonfire in the beach and it provided us with enough light and heat to keep us from shivering.

Some winters, large Washoe Lake, along with little Washoe Lake would receive more run off than usual and some years it would be a small run off. The smaller lake was not that deep, so it froze solid for quite a distance out into the lake and made a fantastic ice rink.

Several families would drive out there in the evenings while there was a smidgen of light and we would sit around the blazing bonfire and drink hot chocolate and coffee and eat doughnuts. These doughnuts were large, heavy and delicious. Several in your stomach kept you from falling over on your skates.

Some of us had figure skates, while others had clamp on ones. Sometimes we shared ours with a few who didn't have any skates so that everyone could have a good time.

Heading home tired and cold, we would pass many fields on our way back to Reno that actually had cows and horses, sheep and goats in them instead of developments.

These were the good old days and actually Washoe Lake was considered far from town. The Cottonwood tree still stands today, mostly dead, showing its age gracefully, but still standing as a sentry guarding the beach.

Whenever I pass it on my way to Carson City, it brings back memories of those unforgettable chilly nights and those lead weight doughnuts.

## Crisp Toast

On a snowy Christmas Eve with the sound of sleigh bells sounding in the distance, I entered this world as the only child, niece and grandchild on my Mother's side of the family. I was especially loved by my grandparents. Some of the happiest times of my life were spent visiting the house my grandfather built in 1929. It is now occupied by Walden's Coffeehouse on Mayberry Dr. and McCarran.

Being partially paralyzed did not stop my grandfather from going across the street to the huge Schiapcasse Ranch to borrow a horse. Attaching it to a plow, which one of my daughters still has in her front yard, he would prepare many acres for spring planting. Following beside him I would help him plant row after row of Burpee seeds.

Rising early in the morning with the rooster's crowing, we would sit huddled around an old black kitchen stove, drinking coffee and eating toast prepared on top of the stove. More than one time it was very crisp. Using the colorful jams and jellies my Grandmother had sweated over preparing in the summer, we would enjoy these square jewels.

Before you know it, harvest time was here and we would load up his 1927 Ford truck every week with colorful and aromatic vegetables, fruits and eggs. These were delivered to the colossal and stately mansion on California Avenue every week.

In this house I learned about deep love by eating crisp toast more valuable than any jewels.



*The House at Mayberry and McCarran My Grandfather Leonard Hawkins built  
In 1929 now houses Walden's Coffeehouse*

## An Unusual Mound

Rising from my grandparents backyard was a large mound of dirt covered with grasses, wildflowers and small rocks. Steps led down to a heavy wooden door that held many mysteries. You could let your imagination run wild.

Was it a bomb shelter, an ancient burial site, or a haven from tornados? It was simply my grandparent's root cellar. Grandpa had lined it with concrete and in the summer it was the coolest place around.

The only light was when the door was open and immediately your eyes were drawn to glorious vivid colors lining the shelves. It reminded me of an artist's palette.

All kinds of fruit, vegetables and pickles were canned in glass mason jars lining the shelves like toy soldiers. Everything had been grown by my grandfather using a horse and a plow and a lot of sweat and hard work. Every year this huge garden would be planted even though he was partially paralyzed in one of his arms.

During the sweltering summer my Grandmother would slave over a hot black stove preparing this canned food for the cold winter months ahead.

Sitting in numerous baskets were apples, potatoes, onions and squash with odors that permeated the air.

Jams and jellies in jars of all sizes and shapes looked like gem stones resting on the shelf. My favorite jam was the light colored apricot with little pieces of apricot mixed in.

In the summer, when the heat was extremely hot I would go into the root cellar and close the door. It was very dark. Sitting on a basket of potatoes I would imagine the places I would like to go, the people I would like to meet and the adventures I would like to discover. So many dreams, would there be time for it all?

The root cellar stimulated my imagination and swept me away to the Land of Oz; this cellar was my own special sanctuary.

## A Piano from Cripple Creek

Almost sixty years ago, after a hard day of work my Grandmother who had arthritic hands, would sit down and play a concert for me, her only grandchild.

Grandma Hawkins had brought this piano from Colorado, when they settled here in 1929 in a house Grandpa built at the corner of Mayberry Drive and N. McCarran. This house is now occupied by Walden's Coffeehouse.

Listening to her playing pieces from Tchaikovsky, the Red River Valley and the White Cliffs of Dover, I sat mesmerized. I was about 8 years old.

It didn't matter to her that she had already worked a hard eight hours, and she still had lawn to water, eggs to gather, dinner to cook and all the other things necessary to run a house. She was the most unselfish person I have ever known.

Still, to this day, I cannot read music and I'm trying to teach myself to play a Hammond Organ, my father gave me a few years before his passing.

But there was nothing like the music that came from that old upright antique piano from Cripple Creek. I imagine in its heyday it had seen many barroom fights, many painted ladies and some rip roaring good times.

Looking at the same coffee stained and well worn music she played brought tears to my eyes. If all could be as unselfish as she was, what a great world this would be.