

I LIKE GROWNUPS!

BY

ED IRVIN

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction / 4

My Dad at San Pedro / 5

Pike's Peak at Midnight / 7

The Day I Carried the Turkey / 8

The Fox that Twitched / 9

The Stranger I liked / 11

In Business for himself / 13

The Juice, the Ash Pit, and the Lawn:
Getting to Know Mr. Coad / 15

INTRODUCTION

Grownups were always a wonderful part of my childhood. I had the immense good blessing of family, friends, and other relatives who loved me, played with me, prayed for me, and set powerful examples. That relationship continued all my life; I always had healthy, interesting adults ahead of me with whom I bonded. In my twenties it was adults in their forties. In my thirties it was adults in their fifties and so on. Now that I am in my mid-seventies there are few role models alive so I am trying to be such to younger people!

My love of grownups began with my parents. What great people! My mother brought music, poetry, and art into our life. My father, with only an eighth grade education, always had a job with adequate compensation even in the heart of the Great Depression when I was born! That's why you'll see him on the cover of this book. He is on your left. A co-worker, Ed Campbell, is on your right. My dad said Ed Campbell was the laziest man he ever worked with except for the time they climbed a fence to cross a farm field as a shortcut and the farmer's Black Angus bull charged them! Dad said he didn't know Campbell knew how to run.

The two men are sitting on the running board (remember them?) of a City of Colorado Springs van in near-zero weather. They are wearing sheepskin coats – the warmest available in that day. The year was 1930.

And so from my father to an eccentric neighbor you, hopefully, will see the power of adults in a child's life. And you know what? I still like grownups!

-- Ed Irvin March 2007

MY DAD AT SAN PEDRO

San Pedro Harbor, California, was the business end of U.S. shipping. Long Beach Harbor, on the other hand, was the recreational end with a touch of glamour. As you look back on it, both were needed to sustain a balanced view of our civilization. San Pedro in 1942 had the warships; Long Beach had the amusement park. We kids could go down to Long Beach on the P & E “red car” for fifteen cents and have a great day swimming, fishing, or riding the bump-‘em cars – my favorite as my friends remembered later when I began to drive. We never thought of going to San Pedro! But my father did...

He was something of a patriot and wanted to defend his country following the Pearl Harbor attack, December 7, 1941. He had been drafted into the army in 1918 as a seventeen-and-a-half-year-old, took the physical, reported for duty at Camp Carson, Colorado Springs, and was issued a uniform. Two days later the armistice was announced. He kept the uniform but never actually served.

So when WWII came along he was forty years old with a wife and two children. There was no place for him to serve. And then he read a plea printed in the Los Angeles Times asking for volunteers in the U.S. Coast Guard to patrol San Pedro Harbor on Sundays, giving the enlisted men a day off. He answered the plea, was accepted and issued a uniform. This time he put his loyalty in motion. I was awfully proud of him. He was the number one grown-up in my life!

He carpooled to San Pedro – thirty miles away – early on Sunday mornings, returning home around 4:30 p.m. That gave him time to shower, change clothes, eat a bite, and make the evening service at our church. His church clothes were nice enough, but I thought he was really handsome in his Coast Guard uniform and should have worn it to church. He held the rank of Chief Petty Officer.

I must tell you that at the time he was a strong Republican – so strong that he forbade me to listen to President Roosevelt’s radio speeches. The only time he relented was when I told him our high school civics teacher gave us instructions to listen. It was a class assignment. In 1940 I remember our family going to a Wendell Willkie for President rally and my father saying he would vote for anyone who was running against Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Ten years later he had completely changed! He became a strong Democrat and spoke of Roosevelt almost in terms of sainthood.

While on duty at the harbor he always wore a .45 caliber pistol on his side. He had carried a .38 pistol when he was a cowboy on the Calhan Ranch near Colorado Springs, but this was different. He never had to use the gun, but on a couple of occasions he patted it while convincing an unknown person to get out. One time he found a stranger smoking on the pier next to a battleship. Thousands of gallons of fuel were stored nearby. My dad approached him and asked him to stomp out his cigarette. The stranger refused. A second request

was made, this time in the language of an order. Still the man resisted. Then my father – at six foot three and two hundred and twenty pounds – stepped close and said something to the effect that the man had to choices: crush the cigarette or take the heat of the automatic. At that the man complied. Dad then asked for his papers to see if he was authorized to be on military property. The stranger had none. Dad then patted his pistol and pointed the way out. It worked.

Chalk up one for defense!



PIKE'S PEAK AT MIDNIGHT

New Years Eve in Colorado Springs was focused on Pike's Peak. That venerable mountain top looked down grandly on the city known for bracing air, immense vistas, mineral water and Eastern tourists. I had the good blessing of being born there at Bethel hospital in 1930. The depression was one year old so later I came to understand what my parents meant when they said, "You grew up in the Depression."



Ed and sister with Dad 1936

The landmarks around our city were beautiful, known all across America. The Garden of the Gods was the most popular site for tourists. Then there was Seven Falls, Manitou Springs (mineral water springs), Will Rogers Shrine of the Sun, the Cog Railway, the Broadmoor Hotel, the Black Forest, and Austin Bluffs. But far and away the most impressive was Pike's Peak. Hardly any of the tourists knew it was named for Zebulan Pike, the explorer. I had learned that from my Father who was a surveyor for city roads and later for the state highway department. Prior to that, when he was twenty, he drove touring cars up Pike's Peak's gravel road – an open top Maxwell was his favorite, holding eight passengers.

But the best part of Pike's Peak came on New Year's Eve when a giant red flare would be lit to welcome the New Year. The day before a group of seven or eight men would hike to the 14,000 ft. summit and set up the display. A blizzard or heavy rain or simply a cloud would, of course, obscure the event but remarkably most December 31sts were clear. Our kitchen window on Cache La Poudre faced west so we would gather round and watch as the big hand on the mantel clock climbed toward twelve. Then, just as the old clock began to chime, the flare was lit and the sky burst with red color! I had a cousin who was one of the hikers in 1939 and we would joke that we could see him on top.

The fun was then going outside in the cold night air. Horns were honking, fireworks were exploding, and neighbors got together with singing, laughter, and hot chocolate. Hober Bentrup, our neighbor to the east, had been a bugler in the Great War so he dutifully brought out his old dented bugle and flawlessly played reveille. I know it doesn't make sense, but that bugle call was the signal not to get up but to go to bed! So off we went, bed warmed by hot bricks wrapped in towels, waiting for the sunrise of a brand new year.

THE DAY I CARRIED THE TURKEY

The day before Thanksgiving, 1937, was crisp and clear, the kind of late fall day for which Colorado is famous. A four-inch snowfall had already graced the land but was pretty much melted. The talk in our household was all about the family gathering the next day. Mother figured the number to be about twenty, a dozen of whom were grownups. But the best part was anticipation of my Uncle Cyril coming from Wichita, Kansas. He and his wife, Nellie, were due in by train that afternoon, and he was bringing the turkey! He was a conductor on the Rock Island Line and could tell story after story of passengers and their woes as well as funny events, too. In fact, he had an expansive sense of humor and could make any event funny. My mother kept a photo of him in his snappy conductor uniform on her dresser.



Uncle Cyril - conductor 1959

About three o'clock in the afternoon we piled into the old Dodge and drove to the station. Twenty minutes after arriving we heard the approaching whistle and saw the voluminous clouds of steam billowing into the cold air. The train stopped with a shudder and a squeak followed by a great hissing release of steam. What a thunderous, glorious moment!

And then there he was: my Uncle Cyril stepping off the train, helping Nellie step down, and offloading the luggage. Last of all came the turkey in a big brown box. He used to say, "There's no turkey like a Kansas turkey!" Hugs and kisses abounded. Uncle Cyril lifted me up with a great sweeping motion and chucked my chin. He was a big burly man, a bit on the rough side, but with a quick wit and an authoritative voice. He boomed out, "Here, Eddie, you

carry the turkey." Boy, was I proud – entrusted with twenty-two pounds of bird. I weighed about sixty pounds.

The next day I stood in awe as he took command of the kitchen and with dear Uncle Alfred made a great dinner. He winked at me and said, "Remember, you get the wishbone." I'd already made my wish: that he would move to Colorado Springs!

THE FOX THAT TWITCHED



First Baptist Church, corner of Kiowa and Weber, Colorado Springs, Colorado. Historic building erected in 1890. Church was founded in 1872 when the city was one year old.

Irene St. John had money. She never flaunted it but you could tell she was used to the finer things in life. Her husband was a successful contractor and even in the midst of the depression his ability and reputation carried them through, especially when he built a home for the rich people on Wood Avenue, Colorado Springs. Our family knew the St. Johns through the church, not construction nor real estate. We were renters.

I remember them parking at the curb in front of the First Baptist Church. Their car was a big Chrysler, yellow with shiny chrome – the latest model.

The St. Johns lived in an area known as Nob Hill. Plenty of money there. Yes, Colorado Springs had two areas of wealth and we thought we were really something knowing folks in both areas! Her son – my age – was in my class at Columbia School and we were good chums, especially riding bikes together. I regarded her as one of the important grown ups in my life.

Mrs. St. John was thought to set the dress style for the church. Even though most could not afford what she wore, she nevertheless lifted the fashion tone of the congregation. She was not high hat nor haughty but she had a way of letting everyone know she was there!

One of her trademarks was pince-nez eyeglasses. Rimless with a gold nosepiece, they hung down on her ample bosom by a black silk ribbon. When she slipped them on she used a sweeping motion that created an air of importance.

The other trademark – for Sunday dress, at least – was a fox fur piece. I shall never forget it. It looked like a real fox hanging around her neck with the head curled over her right shoulder. Yes, I said “head” for the fur had a face with two beady eyes and a shiny black nose.

I usually sat with my grandmother in church, right behind Mrs. St. John. My father sang bass in the choir and my mother was the organist so I was in grandma's care. My friend, Alan Wells, usually sat with me.

One Sunday when Mrs. St. John sat down after the first hymn, the fox head slipped down off her shoulder and rested on the curved back of the dark oak pew. That put it about eighteen inches from our hands. It looked real. Alan and I whispered to each other that it was looking directly at us! The more we thought about it the more we convinced each other that it was alive. Shortly Alan extended a finger towards the nose, and then pulled it back. I tried it and got a little closer. Then it was Alan's turn. Then I tried again. Unfortunately, Mrs. St. John shifted her weight in the pew just as Alan reached once again to touch the nose. The fox lunged for Alan's finger, made contact, and everyone in our section heard that eight-year-old boyish voice yell out, "It's alive!"

Our immediate pew burst into laughter while the rest wondered what was going on. Grandmother was horrified. A deadly stare from the bass section of the choir told me there would be recriminations from Dad that afternoon.

The next Sunday grandmother sat two rows behind Mrs. St. John.

THE STRANGER I LIKED

My dad could fix anything. If the old Maytag wringer washer failed he never called a repairman; he took it apart, found the problem, bought a new part from Jardine Plumbing and installed it himself, then threw the switch. Sometimes he made the part, thus saving a few cents – important in the midst of the Great Depression. He also kept our 1929 Dodge going, straightened out the wheels on my Radio Flyer wagon, tacked new soles on our shoes, and replaced window sash weights.

But there was one thing he couldn't fix. It was the old Montgomery Ward upright radio in the living room. It was built to compete with the more expensive Philco and I sometimes wished we had the Philco with its slanting dial face because I was taken with their slogan, "No stoop, no squint, no squat."

My father had taken it apart and checked the tubes, put a drop of Marvel Oil on the dial shafts, tested for loose wires and so on but to no avail. All he could get was a loud hum. We missed listening to the Breakfast Club with its famous slogan, "It's a beautiful day in Chicago!"

One night a single man stayed with us. It was quite common for Colorado Springs folks to host tourists at the height of the summer travel season; indeed, the Tourist Bureau kept a list of willing homes and set a fee of two dollars per night, including breakfast. Sometimes people of comfortable means would get caught short in towns with hotels and cottage courts (we call them motels now) filling up early. I remember some fascinating grown-ups who stayed with us. One time two spinster sisters from Skagway, Alaska, stayed three nights with us. In my mind's eye I can still see them struggling with their brass-bound steamer trunks trying to get them up on our porch. Dad helped them.

But it was unusual for my mother to take in a single man. She preferred couples or single women. Nevertheless, a single man came to the door one Saturday afternoon and Mom took him in. He looked OK, sported a trim mustache, and was nicely dressed with bright green galluses, holding a drivers' cap complete with goggles. (Dad said it was obvious he had money.) I liked him right away, especially when he showed me some card tricks. Mother served him a glass of homemade root beer, chatted a few moments and learned he was in the radio business. Then she showed him to the guest room.

He asked politely if he might listen to the National Barn Dance on our radio and was disappointed to learn it was not working.

The even passed quietly, the night hours slipped by, and dawn found mother cooking bacon and eggs as he wanted to get an early start. About halfway through breakfast, Dad came down the stairs, then stopped and exclaimed, "The radio's working!" Sure enough, a Sunday morning hymn fest was playing softly. I

went into the next room to check it out and found a piece of wire and a clip on the floor.

The stranger expressed his thanks, got his suitcase, and headed for his flivver. "What was his name?" Dad asked. Mom replied, "He said it was Emerson."



Eddie, 9 years old, next to the radio.

IN BUSINESS FOR HIMSELF

Lockheed aircraft factory had to make some adjustments at the end of World War II. My Uncle Virgil Virden had worked there for six years as a machinist, moving from Colorado to California in 1939. It was a good move and he took to the work with great diligence. About half-way through the war he was assigned to the production team of Lockheed's famed P-38. He often regaled us with stories of P-38 action that came back from the Pacific theater. When I saw photos of such action in the newspaper I was sure they were planes he had worked on. After all, he was a favorite uncle and I thought he could do no wrong!

But some things in the plant readjustment didn't quite fit with his sense of accomplishment so he began to ruminate of finding a new job. Perhaps he had grown weary with the commute from Alhambra to Burbank. Perhaps he was a bit burnt out with overtime hours, production deadlines, or the thought of a lay-off.

At any rate he made a profound career change and opened a frozen food store in Alhambra. Frozen foods were a new wrinkle on the market and were extolled by the food editor of the newspaper. The idea of buying a side of beef or a carton of frozen peas and storing such in a rented locker was new to the home scene. And so, the editor proclaimed, the opportunity was open for a new enterprise. Hand-in-hand with that was the development and promotion of home freezer, obviating a trip to the rented locker. So he was in business for himself.

And so the shop opened on West Main Street, Alhambra, about seven miles from downtown Los Angeles. The first year was great! Not only did frozen food sell well, he added an ice cream counter for cones, sundaes and sodas, complete with three tables and a dozen wire-backed chairs. My mother went to work for him running the ice cream department. She loved to make sundaes and cones, but was askance at the number of paper napkins wasted by the patrons. Even though she was my mother and the owner my uncle, I never got any free ice cream! Too bad, as the store was one block from my high school and it was so easy to cross the street and pay a visit!

But in two years time the business failed. Two reasons were noted. One, the grocery stores began to add frozen food departments and shoppers bought there. I remember Ralph's market adding such a department. It made me mad! I wanted to stop people and tell them to go to my uncle's store.

The second reason was the admitting of an Iranian gentleman to the enterprise. He knew the restaurant business and persuaded my uncle to let him sell sandwiches and coffee. He was not a partner per se but one who rented space. At first it seemed like a good idea – but it was too good as the lunch trade began to prosper. More space was needed for tables; and less for frozen food cases.

My uncle was an amiable man who was subject to manipulation. Soon hot soups were added (cous-cous was the favorite) and then salads. More tables, less freezer. Within six months, like the proverbial camel who just wanted to put his nose in the tent, it was all restaurant.

Uncle Virgil gave it up, figured he had broken even, retired, and occasionally went into eat Iranian sandwiches.



L-R: Evelyn Virden (daughter), Florence & Virgil Virden.

THE JUICE, THE ASH PIT, AND THE LAWN: GETTING TO KNOW MR. COAD

All of the kids in my neighborhood were afraid of Mr. Coad. Gerald Gross said he would never go near his house. Pat Sidner always quickened her pace when passing by. And when Walter Savage's grandson came to visit he remembered that you avoided Mr. Coad like the plague.

At some time or other one of my friends had spilled a quart of grape juice on his walkway and all tartation busted loose. No one could remember who had done it or how much mess had been created or what attempt at clean-up had been tried but that didn't matter. Like so many social norms the relationship had taken on a life of its own and couldn't be changed. Kids were afraid. That was all there was to it.

He lived two doors south of us and I had to pass in front of his house going to or coming from school. In the afternoon he was generally to be found sitting on his front porch, wearing a pith helmet and always a shirt and tie. We figured him to be about sixty – old to us. According to neighborhood gossip he had been a world traveler and he written a book or two and chose Alhambra as a place to retire because of its proximity to Los Angeles.

I never made eye contact as I passed by. Sometimes I would even cross to the other side of the street.

One day his ash pit exploded and set his grape arbor on fire. He yelled for help. My dad saw the smoke and ran over to put a garden hose in play. The problem was handled before the fire department arrived. The arriving sirens brought everyone out of their houses. He thanked my dad profusely for keeping the fire from his house and people marveled at his human disposition.

Our family talk that evening was about Mr. Coad. Dad said, "He's not such a bad old guy after all." Mom said, "Maybe he's just lonely." Turning to me she said, "Eddie, why don't you say 'hi' to him next time you pass his house?" She might as well have suggested that I pick up a rattlesnake.

But the next day, building on my dad's new bond with him, I summoned my courage and without breaking stride called out, "Hi" as I passed his porch. To my surprise he answered back, "Hey, Ellie, come here a minute." (He never did get my name right and I was "Ellie" as long as we lived there.) Haltingly, I made my way up the grape juice walkway and stopped at the bottom step. He told me he needed a lawn boy and would pay fifteen cents if I would mow every Saturday. I agreed but found out it was a tough job. Power mowers hadn't come into vogue yet in 1941 so I worked with a heavy iron and oak push mower. The grass was Bermuda which was thick and matted and had earned the nickname "devil grass"

all over Southern California. A couple of times I had to get my dad to help. I was eleven years old and still skinny. But I did the job and Mr. Coad always paid me on time with a word of thanks.

One payday he invited me into his house to see his treasures. I was too young to appreciate what he had but realized his home was a veritable museum. There were bows and arrows and spears from Africa; a turban from India; Chinese vases galore; a grass skirt from Hawaii; a dozen or so carved fisherman figures from Norway; and a huge Mexican sombrero hanging on one wall. Then he handed me a little trinket from Japan: a little flat wooden box that hid a coin when you opened it a certain way. I still have it. The neighborhood kids were jealous.

Now I was the peacemaker. When his birthday came around my mother made a cake and lemonade. I got a half-dozen kids to come to his front lawn for the party. We sang the happy birthday song and he responded by singing it in German! We were astonished. But more than that, we were relieved. A bit of neighborly help from my dad and a tentative "hi" from me had opened the door of friendship. Soon every kid knew he or she could wave or stop by anytime. And I got a raise to twenty cents!

We all learned that grownups aren't so bad after all.