

All About Me

Ina Krapp

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My four children always liked my recollections. With stories about my childhood, school years in Ohio and my move to California, I talked my way through car trips and bedtimes. I continued this pattern with my grandchildren and, finally, decided to write them down. I've recalled a lot of laughter and realize that my life was filled with a caring family, good fortune and opportunities.

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Mother

I picture two young girls holding hands and running down a grassy slope. I hear a school bell ringing in the distance. The girls are wearing simple dresses apparently made from flour sacks. Half way down the hill, something pops and the faces of the girls turn from happy to sad. One of the girls is my mother Nell. The other is her sister Annis, two years older than she. The two had painstakingly sewed waistlines into their dresses, but then the thread snapped and the dresses hung shapeless again.

This is the only story I can remember my mother ever telling me about her childhood. I know that she was the youngest of fourteen children, and that her father, Russel Johnson, served in the Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the Civil War. I know she grew up in Ironton, Ohio. I think my grandmother, Mahala Craft Johnson, was virtually an invalid after Mother's birth. Any parenting of the two younger girls fell to their siblings, especially the daughters. Mother spoke fondly of my Aunt Rose. Rose married and moved to Minnesota and to my knowledge the two never saw each other again. Occasionally when I was growing up, I remember seeing her other older sisters: Annis, Phoebe and Minnie. I know nothing of my uncles.

Questions about Mother's family went unanswered. "I don't want to talk about that old stuff." In a family album, a photo of my mother showed a slender young woman with a flapper style haircut and a flowered dress. She and Annis balanced a portrait of my grandmother, thin and solemn, between them. They were pretty young women.

After Mother's death, we researched the family history. We accidentally uncovered the big secret. My mother was eight years older than she claimed. Born in 1897, not 1905. Mother covered her age trail like a foreign agent. Her birth date in the family Bible was obliterated, along with any other documents that required her age. However, Grandfather Russel's notarized military records, witnessed by Mother, cited her true birth date. The reason for her age alteration still remains a mystery.

I know this. She was a solitary woman. She didn't have women friends. Just occasional chats over the back fence. She didn't entertain. She couldn't drive a car or write a check. Her education ended in fifth grade. However, it was her determination to improve our lives that moved us from the Cincinnati slums to Winton Place. Her resolve that resulted in our owning a home, instead of renting.

I know she had a strong sense of morality and honesty. My brother Ray once told me about an incident when he shoplifted as a boy. "Mom beat the tar out of me. To this day, I'll take a penny back if I get too much change." Dating included a strict code of behavior and conduct. Ultimately, she raised three happy, successful children.

On her tombstone, we sought the proper words to inscribe. We finally decided: "Mother."

Father

The telephone rang about eight in the evening. “Mom, I have the most incredible thing to tell you,” Elizabeth began. The static of the connection reminded me she was still vacationing at her favorite B & B in Akron, Pennsylvania.

“Did you find out more about your father’s ancestors?”

“Yes, but, it’s not about that. I was talking to June. You know, the owner, about how interesting it is doing family research, and she offered to show me the history of this place. I just wanted to be polite, so I told her, ‘Sure, I’d like to see it.’ Well, Mom, I thought I recognized the name of the original owner, but, to be certain, I ran upstairs and got my computer. Mom, this house was built by your great, great -- about six greats, I think -- grandfather back in 1768. I still have goose bumps telling you about it,” Elizabeth said. I had them, too.

My father, Jacob Ray Garber, descended from a religious family. Staunch members of the Church of the Brethren, his Pacifist ancestors fled Switzerland, refusing to serve in the country’s civilian militia. They first immigrated to Pennsylvania, and descendants journeyed from there to Virginia. Benjamin Franklin Garber, my grandfather, and his wife, Annabelle, reared fourteen children on the family farm in King William County. Across from the farm was the small stone Acquinton Church, where Grandfather served as a minister.

A photograph exists of the entire large family. They are soberly dressed in unrelenting black, except for the small figure of my father, the youngest, wearing a white jacket and matching knickers, leaning against my grandfather’s knees.

The brothers dominated the local baseball competition. Newspaper articles cite the team of nine brothers as “one of the greatest baseball families of the county.” In later years, Jake Garber, my father, was known for “his blinding speed” as the pitcher. They were “The Famous Garber Boys.”

At Bridgewater College, founded by the Church of the Brethren, to be a “Garber” opens doors. I visited there in 1993. A librarian unlocked an oversized mahogany door and ushered me into an awesome room: bookshelves filled with weathered tomes about the Church’s history; plush leather chairs; polished tables.

My cousin, Joanna Garber Moore, compiled a more intimate family history. She wrote of my father’s two year attendance at the College of William and Mary and his subsequent employment as a mailman. These are facts I never knew. However, the account of his relocation from Virginia to Ohio and his position with the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad

is familiar to me. I know he met and married my mother in 1926, and they moved to Cincinnati during the Great Depression.

After World War II, Father worked steadily at General Motors and earned an ample salary. But, I knew my parents were not happy. Mother waited in the driveway on pay days for Daddy to come home. Often it was dark before he arrived. He showed Mother his hands, "Car trouble, again."

But it wasn't car trouble. I heard them arguing. Daddy was going to "bookie joints," Mother called them. He lost a lot of money. He even gambled away the down payment for the little house we dreamed of owning. Escrow was closing the next day. I know they borrowed the down payment money. I know they scrimped to make the mortgage payments. I believe Daddy never gambled again.

The boisterous Garber clan held frequent family reunions. Some of the photos show as many as fifty attendees. Our family attended once when I was 14. I roamed the family farm: spring house, smoke house, chicken coop, barn, woods, tool shed and small silo. I walked all the way to the Acquinton Church to see my grandparents' graves. A group of aunts and uncles drove us to Chesapeake Bay for fishing. I caught an eel, and they cooked it for dinner.

I think Daddy had a joyful childhood and remained close to his siblings despite distances. He was a quiet, undemonstrative man. His grandchildren were his delight. Perhaps, they helped him relive his own childhood happiness.

A Question of Dates

“Well, the hospital was wrong,” Mother said when I asked why we celebrated my birthday on February 17. The hospital certificate clearly stated the date: February 16, 1934. A water splotch obliterated my mother’s age from the document.

I was born at Cincinnati General Hospital in the charity ward jammed with other Depression wives living on welfare or WPA paychecks. My parents hoped for better when they left Ironton, Ohio with their two young children, but the railroad wasn’t hiring in Cincinnati either. I was number three.

Mother fed me on Eagle Brand milk and described me as a fat, happy baby. Good thing -- because in later years there were dinnerless nights or nights we shared one can of Campbell’s vegetable soup. Soup we could buy, because my brother Ray sold bundles of wood on the street corner. My father abandoned his family, so we could qualify for welfare. As the youngest, I dropped a small paper bag of bread and scraps beside his bench in Washington Square Park. Mother coached me, “Don’t look or say anything.” I understood if we were caught, the welfare would be gone.

My sister Colleen, seven years older than I, and Ray played secretly in the unfinished Cincinnati subway tunnels. Later Colleen said, “Mother would have walloped us. Especially me, I was supposed to look after Ray.” With me, Colleen taught. She taught me to read. She taught me to add. She taught me to pretend. Ray needed me as the victim in countless airplane crashes, shoot-outs and jungle adventures.

We lived in a lot of different one or two room apartments. I remember the upstairs porch one where I’d recite “Twinkle, twinkle little star” at bedtime. Then there was the brownstone one with five front steps and a good sidewalk for clothesline jump rope. But the red brick tenement across from the Cincinnati Music Hall is the one I remember the best. The building was shaped like a square “U” with a large cement courtyard. I wanted to play with the other children, but Mother scolded, “No, Ina Marie. They’re not like us.” I understand her now; they were black.

A lot of young women lived upstairs. They gave me old lipsticks and compacts. “You sweet little thing.” Mother threw the lipsticks away, but I got to keep the compacts and powder puffs after she washed them. All the tenants shared one bathroom. Our family, however, used a slop jar Mother emptied twice a day. Once a week, we bathed in a large round galvanized tub. Daddy nailed an orange crate outside a window to create an ice box. To open it, we just raised the window. In the winter, if we could afford them, we stored margarine and milk there.

We three children attended the First Presbyterian Church Sunday school. Occasionally, Colleen took me with her to the regular service. If I stayed very quiet and didn’t fidget, I got to drink grape juice out of one of

the tiny glasses. Every holiday, we received a feast in a big basket from the church. Miss Bann, my kindergarten teacher, gave me treasures: china-head dolls, a beaded purse, a small pressed-glass bowl and an ink pen with a mother-of-pearl top. I still have them, except for the dolls.

Mostly, I remember being happy. Mother played Baby Snooks with me. I was the scolding adult. Many memories: trips to the library two or three times a week; free tap dancing lessons for Colleen -- I learned too, by watching; -- a first grade play --“Princess sleep for a hundred years, a hundred years . . .” practiced over and over.

Daddy retrained as a Tool and Die maker. With the start of World War II, he found a job at Wright Aeronautics. At last: a regular paycheck, a car, a telephone (Mulberry 2918) and a move up town. As Mother said, “We’re out of the slums.”

Home in Winton Place

Sometimes now, when I can't sleep, my mind walks the mile from our family home on Flatt Terrace to Winton Place Elementary School. Out the front door, pass the big Spruce tree, turn left, down three more steps to the sidewalk. A right turn heads me to the corner and another right turn brings me to Epworth Avenue. If I cross the street, I'll be at Goeke's Delicatessen, where I worked the summer after I graduated from Hughes high school. But this time I'll continue on to the next corner.

Here's the biggest intersection in Winton Place, where Epworth meets Edgewood Avenue. I'm in front of the small supermarket. If I turn left, I'll pass the five and dime store, then the dentist.

The bakery is next. Ten cents would buy a flaky, mouth watering, cream filled puff. Finally, the Crescent Theater. On Saturday afternoons there'd be two movies, a serial, a carton and a bouncing-ball-sing-along. I cashiered there when I was thirteen - thirty five cents an hour and a multitude of free movies. Across the street is the duplex we rented for two years. Ray finally didn't have to share a bedroom with my parents. He was sixteen.

But I'm going the other way tonight. My imagination takes me pass the Drug Store complete with soda fountain. Then I head up the long familiar hill. It'll take me fifteen minutes to get to the top where the playground and swimming pool is located. The pool is dry and coated with leaves now, but in my youth, it was filled with kids - at least until August polio season.

Finally, the enormous red brick school is in sight. Grades kindergarten to eighth. I enrolled at the beginning of fifth grade.

After leaving downtown Cincinnati, my family moved to a small four-plex in Correyville. Colleen continued as my mentor. She had me memorize and recite Longfellow's "The Wreck of the Hesperus" and Marc Antony's soliloquy from Julius Caesar. She taught me so well that half way through second grade, I was promoted to third grade.

After we moved to Winton Place, I started fifth grade as a nine year old. Most of my classmates were 11; a few were 12 years old. My first birthday party invitation arrived. Thrilled, I accepted and dressed with care the Saturday evening of the party. At previous parties, "Pin the tail on the Donkey" was the featured game. This party we played "Post Office." My first letter delivery -- a quick kiss -- stunned me. Other parties, we had played "Musical Chairs." This time, "Spin the Bottle" was announced. I decided I was sick and needed to go home.

A few weeks into the school year, a friend whispered a circulating rumor into my ear, "Hildegard Schneider is going to call you out." Hildegard was tough; I was a skinny bookworm. I lived in absolute fear and dread. I was so desperate, I even asked Mother for advice.

“Just tell her your mother doesn’t allow you to fight.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. What I wanted was this: I wanted my mother to storm the school. But stealthily, so the other kids wouldn’t know.

Inexorably, the day of our denouement arrived. A group gathered in the girl’s locker room. Hildegard challenged me.

“Uh, my mother says I’m not allowed to fight.”

“Oh, okay. I didn’t know that.” She walked away. Incredibly, it was over.

Certain teachers and events stand out in my memory. Mrs. Wright taught sixth grade. Late assignments, too much talking, messy papers -- all were controlled by one sentence. “I don’t think I’ll have time to read today.” We students hungered for the next chapter of Penrod and Sam or The Little Princess or Swiss Family Robinson. Those ominous words translated into instant obedience.

In a keepsake box,” I found a poem titled “Up in Heaven.” Age 10.

Sometimes I sit and wonder
Up there, how is life?
Is there a president up there?
If so, does he have a wife?

Are birthdays royal celebrations?
Are presents stacked ten feet tall?
Is there candy and cake and ice cream?
If not, I won’t go there at all!

I remember our seventh grade production of “The Life of Stephen Foster.” For some unaccountable reason, I landed a singing part. A solo. I practiced endlessly: “Beautiful dreamer, wake unto me . . .” Ray, with his glorious natural tenor voice, bribed me to quit practicing.

I remember the eighth grade year book complete with class picture. Next year we’d have to leave our Winton Place nest and venture into the great outside world -- Cincinnati. Three trolleys would cover the distance to Hughes high school.

I’m still not sleeping, but it’s time to walk home. I’ll follow Winton Road down the hill at the other end of the school. A stone wall borders one side of the road. The wall encloses Spring Grove Cemetery, world-known for its magnificent landscaping, lakes and gravesite sculptures.

When I reach Epworth Avenue and turn, I’ll pass three churches on either side. Colleen, Ray and I attended the Methodist Church on the corner. A stone wall surrounds the entry, I see Ray with some other teens slyly girl watching. If today were a summer Sunday, Colleen, her friend Betty Ann and I would stop at Greek’s and buy ice cream cones. We’d walk for hours in the Cemetery on a hot humid afternoon.

I'm almost home now and feeling sleepy, but I don't regret my wakefulness. It brings me back to Winton Place and fills my mind with treasured memories.

Hughes High School

Recently, I talked about high school with my fifteen year old granddaughter, Laura. “Grandma, in high school, were you normal or popular?” she asked. “I used to be normal,” she added. “But now I’m popular.”

“What’s the difference between the two?”

“Well, when you’re popular you wear these pink high tops, and a little heart necklace and you dance more and boys talk with you more.”

“And normal, what’s that like?”

“Normal is nice, too. I have lots of normal friends.”

“Which ones get better grades?”

“Oh, normal, of course. So, were you normal or popular, Grandma?”

“Normal. Definitely, normal.” I didn’t elaborate that I would have preferred to be popular.

Monday morning, 1947. I pulled on my high school “uniform:” wool calf-length skirt, cashmere sweater, anklets and Spalding saddle shoes. The finishing touch: a single strand of pearls, white dickey or small square scarf. Today, I chose the pearls.

I rushed down the steps. Grabbed my gray wool coat, bandanna, gloves, stack of school books, five cents for carfare, and tore out the front door. A half run, half walk, took me to the trolley stop in front of the Methodist Church. Approximately thirty minutes later, the last of my three trolley rides dropped me in front of Hughes High.

Ninth grade didn’t seem very different than the year before at Winton Place Elementary. I hung with the same friends, got good grades, dreaded Physical Education, and searched the library for new books. I experimented with writing an article for “The Gargoyle,” the school newspaper. I jotted down ideas about trying new things – something I hadn’t been doing -- ending the thought with a small verse:

Some day, you may be sorry and sad,
Some day, you may regret,
A chance you didn’t take
When the chance you had.

I showed it to Colleen, now working for the Boy Scouts of America. “Take it to the Journalism teacher. I’ll bet it’s still Miss Koppenhoefer,” she said. Timidly, I followed her advice.

“Write five more and bring them back,” Miss Koppenhoefer said. I wrote six that evening and returned to the Journalism room the next day. “The Gargoyle” carried “Freshie’s Corner” weekly with my byline the rest of the school year. At the time, I did not suspect where that path would lead me.

“Kytyves, Kytyves. We’re the only decent kind of girls, girls . . .” My sophomore year, I joined a sorority. One of three at Hughes. I made new

friends, clowned at slumber parties, went Christmas caroling on frosty Cincinnati nights, wrote plays for special events, strutted in a chorus line. By my junior year, I was chair person of the Dance Committee. At age 15, too young and too shy to date, I learned to book ballrooms, arranged for a local bands, bought favors at Brazils' Novelty Shop and decorated the tables.

Miss Koppenhoefer selected me to be co-editor of "The Gargoyle." Wednesday nights, we students stayed, unsupervised, until the paper was put to bed – no matter how late. Three trolleys, usually about nine o'clock at night, a jog from the final trolley stop to home and, occasionally, an arrival in time to watch "I Love Lucy." Friday, after school, I'd bus from Hughes to the downtown printing shop to proof read the newspaper drafts.

I finally ran out of reasons to avoid swimming class. Most of my friends obtained excuses from their family doctors. "Carol is susceptible to colds." "Peggy has a persistent cough." "Joan has chronic breathing problems." With no family doctor, I relied on my own inventiveness: sore throats, congestion, and stomach cramps. Still, about every other week, second period, I donned my gray wool tank suit, stuffed my long hair in a useless swim cap and eased into the chlorine nightmare. My hair would be wet for the next two periods and stringy straight the whole day. Nonetheless, miraculously, I learned to swim.

On the final day, of the final exam, to pass the class, to be forever finished with swimming P.E., I needed to dive off the board and swim the length of the pool. Unfortunately, my frequent "illnesses" had prevented even one session, even one lesson, even one practice dive. I still remember standing on the diving board, my toes curled around the edge, saying over and over, picturing Esther Williams, "Keep your body straight, your head between your arms, your toes pointed." Ready, get set, go . . . And I did it. I dove and swam. I could be healthy again.

My senior year at Hughes abounded with successes: Honor Society, president of Kytives, adviser to "The Gargoyle." "Flip and Fall with Ina and Paul" appeared weekly. I wrote and Paul illustrated. (At our 50th Hughes reunion, Paul and I searched for each other. His avocation had become his profession.) By the end of my senior year, I even ventured into the dating world. Not very deeply, but it was a start.

"Well, Ina," Miss Koppenhoefer said. "Where will you be going to college? The University of Cincinnati? Miami?"

"I won't be going," I said. "My parents can't afford it. I applied for a scholarship, but I didn't get it."

"You'd go though. If you got one."

"Sure. I'd have to work, but I could do that."

"Come to see me tomorrow."

The next day, I walked the familiar route to Room #201. Miss Koppenhoefer was at her desk. A small woman, a few stains from something on her dress, grayish hair appearing almost combed, she looked up.

“Come on in, Ina. Well, The University of Cincinnati just awarded you a scholarship. It’ll cover your tuition and student fees. You’d better get signed up. Oh, and they’re waiving the entrance exams. Okay, that’s that. We’ll keep in touch.”

The Hughes graduation ceremony took place downtown at the Cincinnati Music Hall, across the street from where we lived when I started kindergarten. Miss Koppenhoefer was in the audience.

University Life

October, 1951 – The same lengthy strides perfected in high school brought me to the Methodist Church. Hurrah, a bus still waited on the corner, but the door was beginning to close. I scrambled on and grabbed an empty seat. Buses had replaced the trolleys, but it still took three rides to reach Clifton Avenue. Hughes high school dominated one side of the street; the University of Cincinnati sprawled on the other side. I stopped at the Alpha Chi Omega house to drop off some notes from history class. Lots of familiar faces there. Many of my Kytives' friends chose the same college sorority as I. Then I hustled across the street and dashed up the long, long line of steps leading to McMicken Hall. Time for my first class, English #101. Spanish, math and history filled the rest of the morning. Alternate days meant biology and lab.

After classes, I gobbled down my usual lunch -- one sloppy Joe -- and headed to a meeting of Alpha Lambda Delta, a scholastic honorary. The trouble was that joining an honorary entailed a fee and buying a pin.

My scholarship didn't help with honoraries or sororities or text books or lunches or bus fare. My parents discouraged my college ambitions: "College is for rich people," they said. Still, Mother slipped me five dollars every week. My big sister in the sorority, Doris, recommended me for a job with the Dean of Graduate School. I worked there all my four years at U.C.; work hours adjusted to fit my class schedule. Later, I would grade papers for Dr. Parker, a history professor, and interview households, door to door, for Mr. Lehman, a psychology instructor. Today, I slam down the phone when a market researcher calls, but then, shamelessly, I questioned away. Summers, I typed and answered telephones at the Ficks Reed Furniture Company.

My freshman year, I wanted a locker. At Hughes, on the first day of school the shared lockers were assigned and padlock codes distributed. Although empty lockers lined the halls of the McMicken building, no one knew how to actually get one. (I worried more about getting a locker than getting good grades.) I asked fellow students. Then I asked instructors. I ended up in the Dean of Students' office. The secretary was puzzled. She made a few telephone calls. Finally, she unearthed a dusty box from a bottom cupboard, collected a dollar from me and entrusted me with a numbered key. Satisfied, I stuck a notebook and a pair of wool gloves in locker #52 and never used it again. At the end of the year, I reversed the process. I retrieved my notebook and gloves and turned in the locker key, but the secretary couldn't find the box. I never got my dollar back, and I never wanted another locker.

My connection to Hughes remained. Miss Koppenhoefer phoned. She asked me to participate in a radio talk show. I did it. The student president of the Honor Society invited me to be guest speaker at the

installation meeting. I did it. Kityves friends begged me to be the chaperone for a week at Lake Chautauqua. I did it. Regrettably.

The four years at U.C. zoomed by. Unlike today, everyone dated lots of different people. There might be a Friday night dance with a Theta Chi and a Saturday night party with a Pi Kappa Alpha. My heart was broken by a Sigma Alpha Epsilon.

I juggled football games, final exams, dance committee meetings, quick bridge lessons, proms and long reports. I shopped for Christmas presents on Christmas Eve, studied on the bus and ran between classes. I loved it all. Except for two things: beer and my old nemesis, P.E.

Inevitably, beer was the beverage of choice at parties. Beside the fact that I was legally too young to drink, I hated the taste of beer. My one glass still looked untouched at the end of an evening.

The University offered an endless variety of P.E. choices: social dancing, modern dancing, bowling, basketball, swimming, badminton and more. All in all, two semesters of Physical Education were required. I tried modern dancing. Changing into a leotard and then back into school clothes took forever and my bare feet got cold. I dropped the class.

I tried social dancing. Not too bad. We didn't have to change clothes. With only a few males in the class, we mostly danced with girls. Still, one semester requirement met.

I tried bowling. Walking to the alley, located in the YWCA building on the edge of campus, took fifteen precious minutes each way. Furthermore, the bowlers needed to take turns setting up the pins. We all wore dresses, making pin set-up a cumbersome task. I dropped the class.

Badminton! That should be fun. It was, but other activities pulled me away. I took an incomplete. As my senior year wound down, as I handed over my duties as president of Mortar Board to the new officer, as I anticipated finishing with honors in history, that incomplete loomed between me and graduation. My friend Carolyn rescued me. We struggled through an eight hour badminton marathon. That effort erased the incomplete from my record and permanently eradicated P.E. from my life.

Along Came Bob

In the movies, love strikes or absolute hatred turns into overwhelming romance or lopsided infatuation weaves a plot. In my case, the road to becoming Ina Krapp began on double dates. Bob owned an old '39 Chevy; my current boyfriend was car-less. I switched boyfriends after a while, but still occupied the back seat with my new date, and Bob the front with different girls. Toward the end of my sophomore year, Bob surprised me and asked me to a fraternity party. At last, the front seat.

We continued dating on and off. Bob spent a lot of time with Phyllis, a cheerleader, and I went out with Jim Pancake, Bob's cousin. Bob and Jim were the same age, both from Springfield, Ohio and currently enrolled in U.C.'s engineering college.

Bob told me this story about his freshman English class and roll call. "Krapp," the instructor said. "Did I pronounce that correctly?" A few snickers worked their way around the room.

"Yes sir," Bob said.

"Don't feel bad. It's just a name. I have someone in my other class named 'Pancake.'"

"I know, sir," Bob said. "That's my cousin."

Dating other people became less and less interesting. We were heading for some stage of commitment, when I was nominated by Alpha Chi for Junior Prom Queen. Phyllis' sorority nominated her.

The next few weeks, we ten nominees flirted and flitted, batted our eyelashes and lunched at every campus fraternity house. The day of the prom, Bob ran into Phyllis.

"Oh, Bob," she said. "I'm so sorry I didn't get a chance to visit the PiKA house."

"Well, I'm going there right now. You can go with me." (I do a wonderful imitation of this conversation.)

I knew nothing of this, until I walked into the Alpha Chi house. Gloomy faces greeted me. "Do you know what Bob did?" And they told me. I wanted to screech at him. Perhaps punch him. But he was my date for the prom.

Two things happened that night: Phyllis won the crown, and I won Bob. I went home from the prom wearing his fraternity pin.

Twenty nine years later, sweating our way up the steep hot hills of Beaver Divide, Montana on our tandem, I did punch Bob. "Phyllis would never have done this," I said.

"What?" he said. "Who's Phyllis?"

Bob and I usually pooled our money to pay for a movie and a White Castle hamburger afterwards. Since we were always short on cash, Bob would sometimes stop the Chevy at closed gas stations. Then he'd shake the pumps to replenish his almost empty tank. One time, we drove up the long Clifton Avenue hill in reverse. "That way the remaining gas

can drain into the engine,” Bob said. Staring into the bewildered or laughing faces of oncoming traffic, I decided to become un-pinned. But I changed my mind.

Bob graduated a year ahead of me and rented a small apartment in one of the old wooden frame houses near the campus. I volunteered to cook dinner for Bob and another couple. The menu was meatloaf and baked potatoes. Unfortunately, I needed to use the oven. The many months of accumulated grease caught fire.

“Bob, what’ll we do? Are we supposed to put flour or baking soda on a fire?” I asked.

“I don’t remember. Better call the fire station down the street.”

“I’ll do it,” I said. “You watch for Dolores and Jim.” I grabbed the phone directory, found the listing and quickly dialed. An instantaneous response was followed by my question: “Do you use flour or baking soda to put out a fire?”

“What’s the address?” the voice said.

“No. . . You don’t need to come. I just want to know whether. . .”

“What’s the address?” the voice repeated. I told him.

Simultaneously, our friends arrived as two fire engines pulled up out front. They attached the hoses and charged through the front door.

“It’s the oven,” I said and pointed. One swarthy fireman opened the oven door. Another walked to the sink, filled an empty glass with water and poured it on the diminishing flame.

“Looks like the meatloaf’s ready,” he said.

That Christmas

After dinner and before he left for his home in Springfield, Ohio, Bob gave me my Christmas present. An engagement ring! As he slid the ring on my finger, as we kissed, as we made promises, one thought persistently pierced my happiness. “What about Colleen?”

Seven years older than I, my sister Colleen marched me to the library to get my first library card. When I was 10 and sobbed, “I can’t do all this homework,” she taught me to make lists and cross off completed assignments.

In my teens, Colleen introduced me to opera. Two tickets to “Carmen,” displayed on the dresser, tantalized me. “But first,” Colleen said. “You have to read the libretto and listen to the recordings.” She guided me into the world of poetry; we recited our favorites in unison. She filled my bookcase: A Dog of Flanders, “To Ina, on her 9th birthday.” The Three Musketeers, “To Ina, on her 10th birthday.” An Old Fashioned Girl, my 11th.

She let me borrow her clothes, helped me fix my straggly hair, taught me to play the piano.

While I dated Bob, Colleen dated Carl. And dated him. And dated him. Inevitably, dates with Carl, a musician, began at two in the morning when the band quit playing. Until Bob, I went through boyfriends with almost scheduled regularity. Meanwhile, Carl and Colleen dated. And dated. And dated.

Christmas Eve, I crept into our sleeping house with my glorious new ring burning on my finger. Colleen’s bed was empty. I plopped my clothes on a chair, pulled on pajamas, washed and creamed my face, brushed my teeth and crawled into bed.

Two thirty: The house waited silently.

Three o’clock: I dozed. “Was that the front door? No.”

Three thirty: “Ina, are you awake?”

“Yuh, I am. You just come in?”

“Uhm. I wanted to show you . . . Well, this . . .” She extended her hand.

Blindingly, beautifully, her engagement ring lit up the room.

“Oh, Colleen,” I said. “Merry Christmas.”

Three Weddings

After I graduated from U.C., I needed a job. Somehow I had never bothered to figure out what I would do with my history major.

“Personnel” sounded impressive. I profoundly failed my first interview when I couldn’t answer the question: “What are the responsibilities of a personnel manager?” Obviously irritated, my interviewer proceeded to rattle off the duties I was **never** going to have at his office.

My second interview took place at Meadowgold Dairy. I was prepared and repeated my recently learned lesson. Afterwards, I waited in the reception room. The young woman seated at the desk answered the intercom and went to the inner office.

“They’re going to offer you the job,” she whispered when she returned. “Don’t take it. It’s really boring. That’s why I’m quitting.”

“You’re the current manager?” I asked. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to summer school. I’ll pick up enough credits to get a temporary teaching certificate. I have to keep taking classes, but I’ll end up with a Master’s in Education.”

That night I told Bob I had turned down a job. “I’m going to summer school,” I said and then explained. “Maybe I’ll be hired in Hamilton. Then we could live there, and you wouldn’t have to commute anymore.”

That autumn, I stood before 34 second graders at Madison Elementary School in Hamilton, Ohio. With my employment and Bob firmly established at Bendix, we began to discuss wedding plans.

“We picked a date,” I told Colleen. “October 29.” Carl and Colleen remained contentedly engaged with no immediate plans.

“Well, I’m talking to Carl tonight. You’re not getting married before me.”

“August 20,” Colleen announced the next day.

“Okay,” said Ray. “That leaves September free.” Ray and Betty Lou Winchell met on a Dude Ranch summer vacation and everything clicked for them. Within a few months, he proposed. Now they chose September 4 for their wedding.

Colleen and Carl took their vows at the Winton Place Methodist Church. Ray and Betty married at her church in Chardon, Ohio. Bob and I were last.

The three of us -- my mother, father and I -- approached my wedding in a state of relief and exhaustion. We were ready. The flowers lined the altar at the Winton Place Church, and the soloist sang something appropriate that I can’t remember anymore. Mother wore her lavender chiffon dress for the third time and Colleen, matron of honor, led the bridesmaids down the aisle. On Daddy’s arm, I walked to Bob.

Twenty five years later, the six of us with assorted children celebrated our anniversaries camping together in the Black Hills of South

Dakota. In the misty night air, we toasted ourselves with silver goblets presented by Carl. In 2005, Bob and I sipped our champagne out of new goblets trimmed in gold and honored the memory of Colleen and Ray and our three weddings fifty years ago.

Welcome to California

The long move of my family from Hamilton, Ohio to San Jose, California represented a lot more than miles. The move meant selling our small Cape Cod house and renting a California ranch style. Trading our enormous grassy yard brimming with trees and flowers for an unfinished dirt yard enclosed by a new, but tacky, redwood fence. It meant distancing ourselves from family and friends. It meant a new job for Bob, new doctors, a new kindergarten for Greg and adjusting to a life style suited to sunshine and warm winters.

Bob plunged into his new assignment at Lockheed, while I directed Mayflower movers unloading our furniture and boxes. But first, I filled the bathtub with lukewarm water and cornstarch for Greg. He sighed and submerged his chicken poxed body for nearly an hour. Brad and Beth (she didn't become Elizabeth until college) claimed the kitchen table. They ripped into the package of typing paper, opened the huge box of brand new Crayolas and turned out reams of drawings and scribble.

When beds were assembled, some sort of lunch consumed and naptime managed, I grabbed a jug of Gallo Pink Rose and collapsed in a kitchen chair I carried to the barren dirt back yard. Nine days later, the younger two children broke out in poxy bumps. "Welcome to California," I thought.

Emerging from the house after three weeks, I discovered I had neighbors. Right next door was Kaye Shea, complete with reddish hair, freckles and a Texas drawl. Morning coffee and donuts became our daily ritual.

One Friday morning, after all the maple donuts had been gobbled down and the grape Hi-C spilled on the kitchen floor, the radio music was interrupted. "President Kennedy has been shot in Dallas, Texas." Kaye finally broke our silence. "Damn," she said. "Why did it have to happen in Texas?"

Life on Erin Way

Three years after arriving in California, Bob and I continued happily living on Erin Way in Cupertino. We bought our little ranch house, located in what was once an apricot orchard, two months after our move to California. The children walked to Jollyman School, and our neighbors were more than friends; they were family.

Camping in those first years became our major source of family entertainment. Beginning with our initial experience in crowded Yosemite Park, we frequently loaded up the old pink Ford station wagon and heaved our huge homemade wood box on top. Car and box, all crammed with our six person canvas tent, Coleman stove, lantern, food, sleeping bags, air mattresses, miscellaneous chairs and clothes, we'd head for the freeway.

Inevitably over the years, at least one child would get sick or hurt and someone would get lost, usually me. I loved to sleep out in the open. One night Brad, age five, wanted to join me. Throughout the night, I found him half out of his sleeping bag, and I pulled him back toward me and tucked him in.

The next morning, I asked, "How'd you like sleeping out?"

"It was fun," he said. "Cept my head was on a tent stake and ever' time I rolled off, I'd wake up back on it."

On another camping trip -- this one in Death Valley -- we discovered the desert could be icy cold. All the camping spaces with tables were filled when we arrived, so we hauled down the big box on top of the car, and it became our table. I lost my way so many times returning from the bathroom at night, that I learned to wait for Bob to come and find me. But we loved it all: the Eagle Borax Works; Scotty's Castle; Shorty Harris' grave; the sand dunes.

I remember looking and looking for Beth's little red sweater. When we arrived home after a week, I peeled her down for a bath.

"There it is," I said. "Way down at the bottom layer. Right where I put it, before we left home."

Once, we met Joy and Joe, college friends, who lived in southern California, at Sequoia Park. Our three and their three girls filled the campsite. Their youngest daughter, Jill, was only three months old. Joe slept with her bottle in his arm pit so it would be warm and ready for her midnight feeding. Again, we were unprepared for the cold. In the morning we found once wet washcloths frozen and stuck to the table.

Our sleeping bags comprised a strange assortment; the flimsiest being a bonus acquired by trading in my Busy Bee green stamps. Bob "volunteered" to use it, and I doubled up the bottoms of the children's bags to give them extra warmth.

As I shivered out of our tent one morning, I said, "I was so cold, I slept wearing my flannel pajamas, sweatshirt, ski cap and wool socks."

“Me too,” said Bob. “Including my shoes.”

Joy and Joe’s experience camping with their baby influenced me more than I realized. Shortly after Sequoia, I discovered I was pregnant. After the initial surprise, we joyfully anticipated the birth of our fourth child. Beth looked at her two brothers and whispered, “Please let it be a girl.” As requested, Laura joined our family.

“No more camping,” I said. “Not until Laura’s at least two years old. And maybe we should think about buying a small camper.”

Those two years zoomed by as Bob bought a tan Ford truck and an aluminum camper kit. Neighbors gathered to help Bob bend aluminum and install windows. Inside, he designed and built sleeping bunks that converted into seats, luggage racks, an ice box compartment and a larder. A box on top of the truck cab still carried the Coleman stove, lantern, chairs and the old canvas tent where Bob and I would sleep.

When Laura was two, we took off for Canada. The following year we drove back to Ohio. Next the children designed a trip: caves and ghost towns. I found an old journal from that 1970 trip.

July 3 – I wrote: “Took a trip on dirt roads to Masonic. Greg found a can opener or cork screw or olive pick. Brad found a handle for something. Laura picked flowers and Beth had the wind knocked out of her.”

July 4 – Exploring near Mt. Paterson along Sugar Creek, Beth wrote “Laura fell in a creek and Beth did too. We stopped for lunch and Laura fell in a creek again.”

July 6 – Camped at Lava Beds National Monument, I wrote: “Went in caves all day. Finally let Greg, Brad and Beth go in Catacombs Cave alone. They got lost. Greg said they were doomed. Brad saw an arrow and they followed it out. Brad fell and hurt his knee running out of the cave.”

July 7 – Camped at Kershaw Ryan State Park in Nevada. I wrote: “The wind blew the paper plates off the picnic table, so Bob nailed them to the table. Then the wind blew the taco salad off the plates.”

July 8 – Camped near Cedar City, Beth wrote “It hailed and rained. Had lunch at camp. Ate deviled ham with lettuce. For dinner, we had spaghetti.”

July 10 – Camped at Bryce Canyon, I wrote: “Beth and I went horse back riding. Scary when Beth’s horse shied.” (I remember this now as a near-death experience.) “Others went on Fairyland loop trail.” Bob added a footnote: “Eight powerful miles.” I continued: “Met at lodge. Everyone had good time.”

July 12 – I wrote: “Today is Brad’s birthday. Had breakfast in Loa at the ‘Lonesome Pine.’”

July 15 – Camped at Ashley National Forest. Greg wrote: “We fought the flies off with everything we had. Don’t know if we can hold out the night. The horseflies here bite.”

July 19 – I wrote: “Home!”

In Iowa one fall, we wondered why everyone was leaving the campground just as we arrived. By the time we heard the tornado warnings on the radio, it was too late to leave.

We were all in the camper, witnessing our huge tent puff up like an oversized balloon.

“Bob,” I said. “I’ve always heard that in a tornado you should crack the windows.”

“Good idea,” he said and headed for the tent. We watched as he entered. The tent collapsed and draped around him. Undaunted, he put the poles back up; we squealed as the massive canvas plopped down on him again. Fortunately, the tornado missed our campground, and, gratefully, we six never again needed to squeeze into the camper to sleep.

As the children matured, they’d go to bed in the camper the night before a trip. Bob and I would rise while the sky was still inky and climb in the front seat, and he’d start the engine. The day before, I always stopped at Shultz’s Bakery and bought three dozen kolaches. I still remember that irresistible aroma emanating from the large pink box. By the time we’d gone four blocks, Brad would tap my shoulder from the upper bunk. Using the crawl-through, he’d slide into the front seat to claim his pastry. By his first bite, the other three would be holding out their hands. I’d unscrew the thermos lid and pour two cups of coffee, and we’d all know the trip had truly begun.

I’m glad I didn’t realize when we camped at Canyonlands and Capital Reef National Parks during Spring break in 1975 that our last family trip was in progress. Greg was a senior and Brad a junior at Monta Vista high school, Beth attended Kennedy junior high school and Laura still walked to Jollyman. Although camping trips continued and still do today, first one child and then another couldn’t join us. Recently, we took our nine year old grandson, Eric, to Lava Beds National Monument, a venue from our cave and ghost towns trip. However, this time instead of leading our children through the caves, Eric led us, cautioning us to be careful and “watch our step.” And we didn’t get lost.

The Café Erin Way

Santa Claus delivered a “Suzy Homemaker Stove,” as requested, to seven year old Beth. Santa and Mrs. Claus were clever enough to assemble it several weeks before Christmas, along with a “Playschool Gas Station” for Greg and a child-size tractor for Brad.

Two days after Christmas, Beth and her two friends, Jamie and Wendy, said, “Let’s have a restaurant.” They turned our garage into the “Erin Way Café.” It wasn’t a bad deal for me, since they swept and tidied the garage for a full day preceding the grand opening.

We consulted on a menu: hamburgers, 25 cents; hot dogs, 15 cents; potato chips and Hi-C, orange or grape, included. Menus were hand-printed and decorated; card tables and chairs set in place; tablecloths, of course, and lots of paper plates stacked and ready. Posters announced the event.

Every mother in a three block radius must have been frazzled with too much Christmas and too much cooking because the children descended on the café like crickets on a cornfield.

The three waitresses coordinated their attire and carried yellow pads and sharpened pencils for order taking. With all orders recorded, they concentrated on cooking. We all learned quickly.

Powered by a 60 watt light bulb, a “Suzy Homemaker Stove” cooks hamburgers at a remarkably slow pace. Fifteen minutes produced one hamburger – medium rare. Since about a dozen hamburger orders existed; not to mention, an equal number of hot dog requests, we begin to hear, “We want food” emanating from the garage, probably started by Beth’s two brothers.

I pulled out the big guns – an electric skillet and large pot. Cooking got serious. The sound of a huge crash resounding from the living room interrupted the chef and her three assistants. Two year old Laura had propelled her brand new baby buggy into the Christmas tree.

I looked at the smashed ornaments, scattered icicles and still blinking lights and said, “We’ll finish un-decorating later,” and returned to the kitchen.

In the end, we fed the neighborhood and the “Erin Way Café” founders shared a profit of \$5.15. The restaurant didn’t reopen until another holiday produced the “Suzy Homemaker Oven.”

The Road to Baja

In one month's time, Elizabeth married her high school sweetheart and they departed for college at Cal Poly, Brad took off and joined the navy and Greg graduated from San Jose State. Laura, Bob and I struggled, preparing for Christmas: baking cookies, going to traditional parties and buying gifts.

"We need a change of scenery," Bob said. "This is too depressing." By now, the thrill of having a bathroom to herself had lost its novelty for Laura, and she quickly agreed. Greg had hoarded the money from his part time job and was ready to stretch his bank roll of \$3,000 for a year of touring in South America.

"You should go camping in Baja," Greg said. "You've been saying for years you'd like to do that. You could even give me a start on my trip by dropping me off in Mexico."

We decided to leave two days before Christmas, keeping in mind that Laura had to be back in two weeks for school. Bob scurried out to the garage and began to construct an enclosure for a port-a-potty. He loaded up on water containers and found a folding picnic table. Safeway became my most frequented destination, as I stocked up on canned goods and non-perishables. Lastly, Greg came home to recuperate after his four impacted wisdom teeth were removed.

"Do you remember Scott?" Greg asked. "He went to Baja with me a couple of years ago."

"Why?" Bob asked.

"Well, he'd like to come along as far as Guatemala with me." I worried that our camper was too small. "We could sleep in the tent," Greg said. Somewhat reluctantly, we agreed.

Abandoning our Christmas tree, we were off. We drove four miles, entered the freeway and heard a resounding crash. The port-a-potty, accidentally left untied on top of the camper, splintered into shreds on the road surface. "Keep going," the speaker from the police car warned.

We drove as far as San Luis Obispo, visited Elizabeth and Ken and camped near the ocean. We three felt very warm and snug in the camper, as rain teemed down on Greg and Scott's tent. The next day Greg discovered two things: his \$3,000 in traveler's checks was drenched and his shoes had developed a permanent squeak. We rushed to find a bank still open on Christmas Eve day and then to purchase some zip locks. One more camping night in the U.S. at Anza Borega State Park and, finally, "Welcome to Mexico."

Bob, Laura and I had a snack from the camper and opted to stay in a small hotel in Ensenada. Greg wasn't hungry and Scott treated himself to a hotdog from a local vendor. Then he and Greg settled into the camper for the night. About midnight, a loud knock on our hotel door awakened us. It was Scott.

"I'm really sick. I need a bathroom," he said. And so through the night: a knock, the bathroom, another knock . . . We offered to double up and give him a bed.

"No," he said. "I'll just sit in this chair in the corner. Uh, did Greg mention that I'm epileptic?" He hadn't.

"I'll just put my pills here on the table. If I should have a seizure, give me one afterwards." Greg slept peacefully on in the camper.

The bright morning sunshine cheered us all. A local doctor gave Scott a shot and told him to drink fruit juices. We headed south. Greg remembered his favorite camping spots from his previous trip. We stayed at El Rosario for the night. The view of the bay lived up to expectations, but for some inexplicable reason the out houses were three sided. Going to the toilet offered an opportunity to wave to truckers on the road.

Bob had brought numerous spare parts and tools along prepared for every car emergency. Except for the one that happened. Not only did we lack a spare front brake shoe, but a tool to remove the existing one. We were stranded by the side of the road. A California licensed motor home stopped.

"Are you folks okay?" Bob explained our problem. "I have the tools you need, but I can't stay and help. I have to get to the next town to buy gas before everything closes up." He handed Bob a complete set of tools, explaining that he had two sets. Our good Samaritan, refused money, but did give us his home address. Later, Bob mailed the tools to him.

Greg and Scott hitchhiked into Guerrero Negro hoping to find the necessary part. I decided I wanted to lie in my bunk and stare out the window.

"Anybody want to play a game?" Bob asked. Silence.

"Backgammon, maybe?" Silence.

"I'll play with you, Dad," Laura said.

Another cheery sunny day dawned. When Greg and Scott arrived by bus with a new front brake shoe, it seemed even cheerier. Soon we were on our way and stopped for tacos in Guerrero Negro. We were greeted at the cafe. "Los padres de Gregorio. Muy bien."

That night we set up camp near Mulege, another of Greg's special spots. We faced the camper toward the pristine white sand beach scattered with sea shells. The warm blue water of the bay seemed unreal. We were the only campers. Perhaps, because our paradise edged on the local dump.

Another night, this time in Loreto, brought us to La Paz. We joined together at a delightful restaurant for a farewell meal, toasted our travelers and took them to the Matzatlan ferry. Greg squeaked up the gangplank with Scott and began his adventure. We were on our own.

Arrangements were made for Laura to fly home. Our neighbors, the Breuners, would pick her up at San Jose airport and take her to stay with friends until we arrived home. We three enjoyed La Paz, which seemed very cosmopolitan, compared to our recent stops. Noontime, on the day of her flight, we drove to the airport, and purchased Laura's Air Mexico ticket.

“But where is her permit that she is allowed to fly alone to the U.S.? She is thirteen, a minor,” the clerk said, fortunately in English.

“We are her parents, and we give our permission,” Bob said.

“But it must be notarized. You have time. I will show you on the map where there is a notary.” We sped to the notary’s office, the sign read: “Cerrado para siesta.” Bob floored the accelerator back to the airport.

“The plane lands first in Texas. I will telegraph them for permission,” the clerk said. We waited. “Here is your reply.”

It simply read: “Send her.” So we did. Our telephone call that evening reassured us.

“It was fun,” Laura said. “I love first class.”

The next week Bob and I camped on romantic beaches, sipped champagne and stayed in simple, but pleasing, hotels. The camping trip from Hell was over.