

Beyond the House

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I've done some proofreading on the chapters I'd posted here, and in remembering more, added stuff. Here is chapter three, though it's not finished yet.



Allied soldiers and sailors (including American) in Vladivostok, Russia, September 1918 - Note the USA flag top right and American sailors below it

Mom continued her educational interests. She helped a large Methodist church, a couple of miles away in Redwood City, to found a program to serve Mexican migrants. Back then the Bracero program brought in seasonal workers, but of course there were others, with families. Many settled in the Five Corners neighborhood of Redwood City.

Mom got to know some of those families. She brought us kids to a birthday party, with a traditional piñata, something that had yet to spread to the wider American culture.

We also ate at local Mexican restaurants, and I've loved burritos ever since. My sisters and I already liked Tabasco sauce, would soak our breakfast eggs-and-sausage in the stuff. But at one restaurant I encountered a seriously hot condiment. Which I also loved.

Better still was Grandma Carlson's cooking. As I'd dreamed of, she always made tuna with grated carrot, very good. She and Grandpa also fixed Swedish hotcakes, which I later understood, are quite similar to French crepes. Mom's super-healthy pancakes were good, and literally quite heavy, while those hotcakes were light, perfect with butter and syrup.

They always referred to themselves as Swedish, though insisted on speaking mostly English in their home. At some point I heard they came over from Finland, and met in San Francisco, which I did not understand. Eventually I learned they were both born in Ostrobothnia, the Swedish-speaking region of Finland.

A few times I accompanied them to Runeberg Lodge and Star of Finland events, meeting hundreds of people there. In an era before Social Security and Workman's Compensation, these fraternal orders played crucial roles in the lives of working families. I now know, from doing genealogy, that many of those folks were distant relatives of mine. I so wish that my memory was better, and that good video cameras had been invented.

Grandpa loved to sing "You Are My Sunshine." Elaine tells me he also sang "The Prisoner's Song,"

though somehow that slipped my memory.

He had served in World War One, not in Europe, but an extended tour in Vladivostok, with the then-secret American occupation. They held the city while White Russian, Czech, and other forces retreated eastward. Years later I found a commendation, for his "engagements with Red Guard." An literally original anti-communist, but he never talked about it.

Grandma used to comment. "Russians are stupid, they thought a nickel is worth more than a dime." I met plenty of smart Russians over there, later on, but of course I never contradicted grandma.

Dad was born in their house, across San Francisco Bay in suburban El Cerrito. He and his older brother Ray grew up there, but had to hitchhike to nearby Richmond each school day to attend high school. Yes, catch rides. It was an earlier era.

The house has two stories, and they put in an outside stairway, to rent the upper floor. When the place was between tenants, dad would go up there, and watch the Golden Gate and SF Bay bridges being built. Now, I am told, the current owners put back the inside stairway, and use the entire building.

Ray became an El Cerrito policeman, and served for over 25 years. We'd see him in uniform, sometimes on a patrol motorcycle. One time he had the (then novel) idea of a Scared Straight program. When the station was quiet, he brought me and my sisters over there, and threw us in jail. He also shut us into the padded cell, and I was surprised to find it had hard walls.

I suppose it worked, as I stayed out of trouble for most of my life. Until, in the 1070s, I sometimes got arrested, not for actual crimes, but some very controversial activities. Even so, I never did spend an entire night locked up. But my wife did, falsely held in immigration detention for a couple of days. After that, she always carried a photocopy of her green card.

My sisters had their culinary quirks too. Below Ray's hillside house was Poloni's Market, a neighborhood favorite. There, Elaine and Marilyn would each buy an Italian sausage. Then peel back the coating, and eat the whole thing, much like a banana.

Ray was a great to his friends, but also, an unashamed racist. He lived in El Cerrito, and had three children. He wife left him, and he raised his kids alone. Well, he remarried once (maybe twice), but it did not last.

One of his sons worked very hard, in two different blue collar careers, and succeeded in many ways. Another son was rebellious, often got into trouble. Let's call him Cal. One time we drove up to the Gold Rush country, to the town of Ione, and its huge juvenile detention facility. I don't know exactly what he'd done, but we'd never seen so much barbed wire in our lives.

Ray's daughter was shy. She married and had two kids. My first formal suit came from a local merchant, and I wore it for her wedding. Unfortunately, they later broke up. She became something of a recluse, and I saw her only once in a span of decades, for my father and step-mother's wedding anniversary.

When Cal was around, we'd hang out together, and play cards. He was a couple of years older than me, but it might as well have been ten years. One Saturday, we took the bus to downtown Oakland, to catch matinee movies. In the old style, with a double feature and more.

As I vividly recall, they were horror movies: Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* and HP Lovecraft's *Die, Monster, Die!* (Based upon his story "The Colour Out of Space.") *Hill House* was subtle, but *Monster* absolutely terrified me. Cal sat there blandly munching popcorn, while I cowered down in the seat with my fingers over my eyes.

Every summer we took a long vacation. Usually we would drive, put in a few hundred miles, then get a motel room early. We kids sat in back of our sturdy old car, and read *The Lord of the Rings* to each other, each chapter aloud. That new American paperback edition featured an introduction by Peter S Beagle, and many years later, I was honored to sit on a convention panel with Mr. Beagle.

In 1962 we drove up to Seattle, for the World's Fair. Marilyn had to be around two years old, and she was a precocious chatterbox. She was proudly announcing to everyone that we were going to "see Attle," apparently a friend or relative.

I'm not sure what route we took, but we stopped in Tillamook to see the cheese factory. Later we got on a big Puget Sound car ferry, and approached Seattle from the water. It was spectacular, especially seeing the brand-new Space Needle. Of course we rode the monorail, and I don't remember much else.

On the way home, dad felt sick, and then became quite ill. He ended up in a Vancouver, Washington

hospital to have his appendix removed. In those days surgery was a much bigger deal, and hospital stays longer. So mom drove us home, and dad flew back after recovering. Later, he told stories of kindness by the airline staff, and of a helpful Catholic priest he encountered along the way.

On most summers we visited mom's family in the Dakotas. She'd been adopted as an infant, and brought to a farm north of tiny Granville, North Dakota. By the time I came along, the farm was managed by family friend Mr. Hills, and we kids loved going there.

Mr. Hills would milk cows in the barn, and separate the cream in a small home device. The barn cat would appear, and sit there with mouth wide open. Then Mr. Hills would squirt milk right on in, fresh as could be. Of course we had to try that too, and yes, it's really good. (No health issues! That comes from later handling and storage, which improperly done, has given raw milk a bad reputation.)

Then we'd drive down to South Dakota. My grandpa Nels Rollag passed away when I was two, so I cannot remember him. At one point the farm house on their older homestead burned down, so Grandma Rollag lived a few miles away, in the small town of Valley Springs, South Dakota.

The farm is in Minnesota, it occupies the literal southwestern corner of that state. As I write this, the family still owns it, between my living sister and our cousins in Wisconsin. We have the homestead document, from Nels's parents, signed by Theodore Roosevelt.

Valley Springs is known from literature, as the Little House on the Prairie Wilder homestead is about twenty miles away, and Ole Rolvaag's novel *Giants in the Earth* is set nearby. One time I met a sweet, elderly lady who was the Poet Laureate of South Dakota, though I apologetically admit, I've never been a big reader of poetry.

We'd stay there a week or two, coinciding with the setup of a traveling carnival. We'd hang out with a girl named Kim, from next door, and learn the ways of rural America.

All of us were deeply impressed by the ferocity of Midwestern thunderstorms, and the damage inflicted by large hailstones. We kids slept in grandma's furnished basement, and during a nighttime storm, we could see static electricity zipping across the ceiling. It wasn't until Fujiko and I moved to Kansas, half a century later, that I beheld such massive storms again.

A couple of times we drove through the Grand Tetons and Yellowstone, of course stopping to see the Old Faithful geyser, and observe some of the huge local wildlife. We'd stay at the rustic Jenny Lake Lodge, and sometimes rent a boat, to go out onto the lake. Uncle Ray had taught me to row, in visiting his fishing boat in the Richmond harbor, so that skill came into use early on. We also went on a guided tour, in a larger inflatable watercraft. I have a few photos from those vacations, and many dear memories.