

## Uncle Gene by Pattye Ann Nicolls

My father was a hard person to know really well. For most of my life, he filtered everything through my mother, Ellen ... his wife, best friend, and confidante for over 60 years. But when she died 3 years ago, he lost his middleman, and for the first time he had to speak directly to me, and I usually called to pester him 2 or 3 times each week. Conversations usually started with the weather, which was always something to complain about, the neighborhood goings-on, the latest family news, and of course, ever present aches and pains. Mine as well. But over the course of these last 3 years, I came to know my father quite a bit better than I ever had, and I enjoyed hearing stories of his childhood, school days, military years, and then Ohio State. I will share some of those stories with you now.

My dad was born at home, the 4th child of 4 boys and 2 girls born to Carl and Ethel Nicolls in a small town in Eastern Ohio called Poland. My cousins Jim and Gayle, here today, still live in that house, that house that I have known for my whole life. My poor grandma had 6 kids in 9 years ... leading Carl's dad Sylvester to suggest that Carl lighten up on Ethel a bit ... of course, Sylvester had 10 or 11 of his own...

Dad had a wonderful childhood ... lots of siblings with whom to squabble ... even during the depression there was plenty of food on the table as his father was a grocer and butcher. Something that I still say today is a remnant of those family meals around the packed table ...FHB ... if there might not be enough of a particular dish being passed around, grandma would say FHB ... Family Hold Back ... notice to all to take a small portion and if the dish made it all the way around the table and everyone had gotten some, then it was OK to have a second helping. Not a bad life lesson... make sure everyone has enough... then if there is extra, you can have more...

His whole life my father LOVED sitting on a beach and watching the waves come in. Perhaps he got this from the family trips to a cottage on Lake Erie when he was young. He always spoke of those trips and how much fun he had. I always remember that picture of Grandpa Carl in that one piece full body swimsuit!

Dad also spent a lot of time on the Nicolls farm in Penn. He would go there to help out in the summer... and would be given the chore of hoeing a row of corn, or plowing with a horse. One time he was horrified that the horse he was working with just laid down and died! Another time his Uncle Art put him up on an old nag, but didn't realize that he plopped Dad down right on a saddle sore... Dad would never forget that wild ride, bareback and hanging on for dear life, as that horse ran as fast as it could to the barn, with Uncle Art running behind screaming for his dad Sylvester to come and save Gene before that nag killed him. Dad remembered the haying season ... his job was to work the horse that was tied to a pulley that hoisted the hay up into the barn loft. Back and forth Dad would lead that horse all day long, as the hay fork was lifted up and down from the hay wagon to the loft. A couple of years ago I brought him an illustrated book on farming practices 100 years ago and he was excited to see a picture of that exact thing... he said it brought back good memories. I guess he forgot about the heat and flies that would have accompanied that task on those days 80 years ago...

In high school he was a very good athlete ... he played basketball and other sports but he was a standout pole vaulter ... he went on to win the state championship in 1944 ... and that was with a bamboo pole and sawdust pit in which to fall.

Dad always said his only regret in his childhood was that grandma always told him she would buy him a saxophone ... and he never got one! Would have rounded out the family band of Uncle Bob on trumpet and Uncle Dave on trombone... although Uncle Dave pawned his trombone so he had money to get married to Aunt Mary!

When Dad graduated from high school he and 2/3 of the boys in his class were drafted into the Army. By the time they were ready to ship out, the war was over in Europe, so they were packed into a troop train for a trip to the west coast. Just before they left dad had written down the lyrics to a new song he heard on the radio... he and his buddies started singing it on the train, and soon all of the other GIs on the train were singing along. The song was Sentimental Journey.

They ended up in San Francisco where he visited sister Betty and her husband Dunk, then took a boat to the South Pacific. Out on the open sea dad and a buddy were sitting in the back of the ship when they saw a periscope pop up from the water... all of a sudden general quarters sounded and all the navy guys manned their battle stations ... Dad and his friend just sat there ...what could they do? He said it took 12 min to zero in on a target... so the ship changed course every 8 min... the periscope disappeared and they had no more problems with it after that.

The ship sailed to an the island of Leyte in the Philippines where 3000 GIs were ferried to a beach, and one by one their names were called off and they got on trucks and left ... leaving behind Dad and 7 other men. They sat there for a while before one of them finally asked.. "Hey! Where do we go?" and were told "you guys are the medics". So they all went to medic school. One of the things of which he was most proud was when a guy came in to the clinic one night when dad was on duty with a big gash on his face from a fight ...the doctor could not be found, so dad got a needle and thread and stitched him up! Mom always said that was the last time he ever sewed anything for the rest of his life! But being in the medical corps was a cushy job ... only 8 hour shifts and plenty of time to borrow a jeep and head out to explore the surroundings.

One night dad headed down to the rec hall to listen to Tokyo Rose's radio program. He said they all liked her show... she played great big band music. They ignored the propoganda. One night as he went in she wasn't on ... instead an announcer was saying that the war was over. Dad went running back to the barracks and spread the good news by yelling "the war is over! The war is over!" He said all the guys came running out and there was a lot of cheering and celebrating.

After the war the troops moved to occupy the Japanese mainland, so they left the Philippines and tried to avoid an oncoming typhoon by going into the China Sea, but it swung around and ran right into their ship instead. He said that men falling out of the ship bunks that were stacked 6 high kept the medics busy setting broken arms and shoulders!

The first place they landed was actually Hiroshima.. .6 weeks after the bomb. Of course no one made any mention of radiation. He said the devastation was amazing. The local people were very hungry. When dad was sitting in a jeep he reached in his pocket and pulled out a caramel ... unwrapped it and put it in his mouth and a woman ran up to him and begged to have the caramel ... he took it out of his mouth and gave it to her ... then one more he had in his pocket. The woman ran into her house and came back out with a landscape picture she had made from pipe cleaners ... he tried to refuse the gift but she insisted. To this day it is one of my most treasured possessions.

They then went to Osaka, where dad was quartered in the emperor's castle ... a huge pagoda where the emperor had once lived. He said that was a pretty cool place to live. It even had a moat with a drawbridge.

One of his duties in Osaka was working at a clinic at a geisha house ... they had a booth where they would examine the women and then pass out medicines to protect the GIs when they came to visit.. Dad said they had huge syringes they used and would just push the plunger down so far... dip the needle in alcohol ... then stick it in the next GI ... plunge down... dip in alcohol... not exactly sterile procedure.

When it was time to leave Japan he spent a month in Tokyo and then shipped back to the states. He was discharged in Seattle, given a donut and \$300, and then he returned by train to Youngstown where his mother was waiting for him on the platform.

All of dad's brothers were in the war ... Bob in the army and Dave in the Navy in Europe, and Don ended up in the very last draft and the war ended shortly thereafter.

Because of the GI bill, Dad ended up going to Ohio State University. Dad was quite handsome back in the day, and a bit of a ladies man in high school and college, leading his family to nickname him Ug... for ugly. To this day I do not think I have heard my uncle Don call my dad anything but Ug. Dad and Don roomed together at a boarding house in Columbus, and living in a rooming house across the street there was a pretty southern belle that dad had his eye on ... one day he followed her down the street and asked if he could carry her books ... but she was with a friend and said no. A couple of days later he saw her again, alone this time, and asked her to a movie. She said yes, and that was the end of his long string of girlfriends... that was the gal he was to marry.

My parents married on Mom's winter break from teaching school, and then parted ...her back to Charleston, him in Columbus ... the first thing they did as a married couple is ... buy a brand new car! Dad took a job at an insurance company which transferred him to Toledo, and in June my mother joined him here, always expecting it to be temporary ... but it turned out to be their home for the rest of their lives.

Addendum: Uncle Don was quick to correct me on the circumstances of my parents' meeting... my story came from my mother, but Don's is a bit different: Dad and Don worked at a restaurant down the street from their boarding house. They left for work at 5 each evening. After a few days, Don noticed a young woman coming out of the boarding house across the street at the same time: Each day. After a few days she appeared at the restaurant. Don says "and she wasn't looking at me!" Mom got her man!