

CHAPTER III



At the age of 12 I was fitted with my first pair of eye glasses to correct my astigmatism and suffered the usual and cruel torture of being called "foureyes" by my fellow students and other kids. However, I did not suffer the agony of acne and pimples although I did have occasional sties on my eyelids. It was about this time that our folks decided it would be good for Bud and me to learn to play some musical instruments besides the piano on which we were both taking lessons. I never did turn out to be a good piano player but Bud became very accomplished and mastered George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" along with a lot of other complicated pieces.

Both Mom and Pop played the piano, Mom by site reading and Pop by ear. Pop was quite an accomplished musician. He played the guitar, mandolin, cornet, trumpet and harmonica. He was also a tenor and sang in the church choir as well as a men's chorus. He organized and directed a fourteen member mandolin club whose members he taught to play and they gave concerts at many places and events. They used to practice at our house when I was little and I enjoyed listening to them.

Bud and I were given our choices of instruments to learn to play and Bud chose the clarinet while I picked the trombone for some reason that escapes me. I think it was because I had noticed in parades that the trombone players were always out in front of the band

and that appealed to the "ham" in me. We all went down to a big music store in Los Angeles to pick out our instruments which our folks bought for us.

They then engaged a young fellow named Tom Memoli as our teacher. He was outstanding and we both became very good at playing our chosen instruments. His father Mr. Memoli, later became head of the music department at Oak Avenue School in Temple City. Pop then taught Walt Mecackrin. a boy who lived across the street, to play the Trumpet. Walt's dad who worked in the oil fields was killed in an accident on the job and Walt's mother supported he and his two sisters by making tamale pies which she sold to neighbors.

As we progressed in mastering our instruments and found some other kids in the area who played the cello, violin and drums, Pop put together an orchestra of sorts and we played at local gatherings and at our church every Sunday. Later when we were in high school we played in the school orchestra and band, but more about that later.

Among my chores was watering the front and side lawns and this was before Pop installed a sprinkler system so I had to do it with a hose and nozzle. Most of the men in the neighborhood who worked in Los Angeles, including Pop, used the Pacific Electric line rather than their automobiles. For one thing the autos were not all that reliable in those days and parking in downtown LA was a problem. As mentioned earlier, the track was just a block from our house. The "Red Cars", as they were affectionately called, were electric and the heritage of Henry E. Huntington who had built a mass transportation system in Southern California in the early 1900's and is better known today for the Huntington Library in San Marino which he established before his death.

Los Angeles was the hub of the systems and from there his red cars (which were painted red) ran east to Cucamonga, Pomona, Pasadena, El Monte, Alhambra and to the various beach cities of Long Beach, Seal

Beach, Huntington Beach and Santa Monica. It was a grand system and contributed greatly to the development of Los Angeles County and Southern California.

One summer Saturday afternoon as I was watering the side lawn, Franklin Paden who was the Assistant District Attorney for Los Angeles and lived up the street from us, came walking by our house on his way home from the red car stop where the tracks crossed Garfield Avenue. He was dressed in white pants, shirt and tie with a tan coat and brown and white spectator shoes. He was wearing one of those flat top straw hats called 'sailor straws,' He said hello to me and unable to resist the temptation I squirted him with water. He complained to my folks of course and I was dealt the appropriate punishment which was a trip to the wood shed with Pop. For some reason the combination of Billy Harker and a garden hose with running water and nozzle was something to give wide berth to and avoided at all costs.

An east-west street named Ramona Boulevard ran parallel to, and on our side, of the tracks. Across the tracks at Garfield Avenue there were a few stores where Mom did some of her shopping. She would telephone her orders and then I would go down and pick them up. These included Beck's Meat Market, Link's Bakery and the Ramona Drug Store. I really enjoyed running those errands for Mom because there was always some kind of reward involved. Mr. Beck would give me a wiener and some of the frost off the refrigeration pipes that kept his meat display cases cold. Mr. and Mrs. Link were always good for a donut and the grocery store would net me a cookie or piece of candy.

The drug store was owned by a Mr. Sanford who was also a neighbor and he could be counted on for a piece of candy or chewing gum. That drug store had a white marble top soda fountain along with several round white marble topped tables and wire lair backed chairs. Mr. Sanford made the best chocolate sundaes I have ever eaten. His ice cream sodas weren't bad ei-

ther. Sanford always stocked a big supply of fireworks and what he did not sell by the 4th of July he would sell to us kids throughout the year. These included all sorts of firecrackers, sons 'a guns, skyrockets, Vesuvian Fountains, burning houses, torpedoes, sparklers, etc.

One day Pop drove his car to work because he had to use it during the day to check on some property. He did not show up at home at his usual time and Mom became quite worried. About a half hour after his normal arrival time at home the phone rang and it was Pop calling from Covina. He had forgot that he used his auto that day and got on the red car for the trip home. He fell asleep on the 20 minute ride from LA and when the street car stopped at Covina the conductor discovered Pop, woke him up and asked why he did not get off at the Garfield Avenue stop as he usually did. Very embarrassed, Pop got off and called Mom. Fortunately we had two cars at the time and she took off in the family sedan to pick him up in Covina. He never did that again.

Pop seemed to have a weakness for gadgets, a trait inherited from him by my brother Bud who displayed the same weakness. Anyway, Pop would spend his lunch hours in the basement of Bullocks Department Store pawing through all the kitchen gadgets and watching sales demonstrations of how to peel carrots, etc. One night he brought home a thing that was supposed to remove peas from the pod. It looked like a little washing machine hand wringer. You inserted the pod between the two small rubber rollers while you turned them with a hand crank. He clamped the thing to the kitchen bread board and called us all in to watch him shell the peas he had picked up at the market on his way home. When he started operating the thing it shot fresh peas all over the kitchen floor and Mom made him take it back the next day.

It was around this time that I came down with an affliction common to most boys of that age. I began falling in love with every little girl in school, but my love

was quite fickle and I would change the objects of my affection on a weekly basis. I enjoyed carrying their books on the walk home from school and just the smell of them. It was a form of infatuation called "puppy love" and nothing serious ever came of it other than my inability at times to concentrate on my school work. I was always sending notes during class to whoever the current object of my affection was that week and would be reprimanded by the teacher when caught.

An infamous kidnapping and murder occurred when I was in the seventh grade. A young girl in Los Angeles, named Marian Davis, was kidnapped and after the ransom was paid her dismembered body was returned to her parents in a cardboard box. The kidnapper, whose name was George Hickman was caught and sentenced to death by hanging. His execution was scheduled for 10 a.m. on a Tuesday. That morning, at precisely 10 a.m., as we all watched the big clock on the wall with a sweep second hand, everyone in the classroom dropped their heavy books on the floor at the same time. It scared hell out of the teacher but was our way of commemorating the event.

One Christmas night the families all gathered at the Baylis home where they had a large artificial tree that was heavily decorated with lights and expensive ornaments and loaded with tinsel. The Baylis kids, Ruth and Harry had got a pogo stick for Christmas and it was sitting by the tree. My cousin Allen Bahn Jr. picked up the pogo and started jumping up and down on it near the tree. He suddenly lost his balance and fell into the tree knocking it down and smashing the tree and ornaments. Uncle Allen grabbed Junior by the ear, pulled him out doors and began beating him unmercifully. The other adults ran out and stopped the melee before he did any serious injury to his son. The Allen Bahn family then departed the gathering and went home.

Grandpa Bahn always bought a large live tom turkey a couple of months before Thanksgiving which

he then kept in a pen to fatten up. We kids used to love teasing the poor bird, but Grandpa finally found out and put an end to our fun by telling us we had scared our share of the turkey dinner off the bird and we would not get any of him to eat at the family dinner. In those days no one gave much thought to air pollution and everyone had a backyard incinerator in which they burned their combustible trash. Pop made one out of a 50 gallon metal drum in which he cut some holes in the bottom and then set it on a brick foundation about four inches above ground level to provide a good draft. It was very efficient and would burn just about anything you put into it other than glass or metal.

We had two large sycamore trees in the backyard that shed a lot of leaves in the fall and it was my job to rake up and burn the leaves every week during that time of year. One foggy Saturday morning I raked the leaves up and stuffed as many as I could in the homemade incinerator. Since the leaves were quite damp from the fog I decided they would need some help to make them burn and got a can of gasoline from the garage. I then went into the house and got a wooden kitchen match and poured about a quart of the gasoline on top of the leaves in the 50 gallon drum. When I went to strike the match on the bricks under the drum the match stick broke. I meandered back to the house, got another match, lit it and stuck it under the bottom of the drum. There was an immediate explosion with a loud "hawoomph" that could be heard all over the neighborhood as flaming leaves and a fire ball shot out of the drum and up about 20 feet into the air. Burning leaves began falling all over the place as Mom came running out of the house to see what had happened. We both grabbed water hoses and managed to contain the conflagration before it reached the wood pile. That delay between matches was evidently just the right amount of time to allow the fuel to form explosive vapors. Fortunate I was kneeling at the bottom of the drum when things took off and thus avoided any injury

but learned a valuable lesson.

Some of the neighbor kids had bikes and as a youngster I learned to ride theirs. I got my first bicycle for Christmas following my 12th birthday. It was a Plymouth, painted blue with red rubber tires. I could not wait to take it out to show my friends and after breakfast on Christmas morning I took it out, shot down our driveway, across the street and head on into the curb on the opposite side. The impact blew out the front tire and threw me up on the parkway. With no place to get another tire on Christmas day I was reduced to just looking at and admiring my new bicycle. Over the ensuing years that bike took me just about everywhere around Alhambra. Auto traffic was light in those days so bike riding was quite safe.

In later years I powered it with a Smith Wheel which was a rubber tired disk wheel with a one cylinder Briggs and Stratton gas engine attached to it. The contraption had a frame which attached to the bike's rear wheel axle by a swivel joint so the Smith Wheel could go up and down independent of the bike. This compensated for banking of the bike during turns. The one quart gas tank yielded about a 60 mile cruise at a top speed of 30 MPH. It had two controls that went up to the handle bars by encased cables. One was the throttle and the other was a compression release. To start the engine you released the compression while peddling the bike and when you let the compression back on it would start and you would go put-putting down the street. I bought it from another kid for \$25. There were two other kids that had them and we did a lot of group cruising together. It was great fun, but I finally sold it to another kid for \$15 who promptly went out riding after dark and plowed into the back of a parked car on Garfield Avenue nearly killing himself. He suffered a concussion and messed up face and spent a month in the hospital.

I had a paper route at this time delivering the Alhambra Post Advocate and the Smith Wheel sure made

the job a lot easier. Each month I had to collect the 30 cent subscription price from each of the subscribers on my route. I got to keep 5 cents out of each collection and got 25 cents for each new subscriber I signed up. Not much money, but it was during the depression days and a little went a long way. People were selling apples on street corners for 5 cents each just in order to survive.

Because burglaries were common during the depression Pop decided to install a self made burglar alarm after we were robbed twice. He installed batteries and a loud bell in the attic and wired the whole thing to the windows where he put dowel pins in place to hold the contacts open when the window screens were closed. The system was controlled by an on-off switch in the back porch. If you did not turn the switch off and opened a window screen the bell would ring bloody murder. Mom almost lost her cleaning woman who was deathly afraid of the alarm after having forgotten the switch and set the thing off several times. She finally got so she would not come in the house until one of us made sure the switch was in the off position.