

## CHAPTER IV



**M**y Grandpa Harker died of a heart attack on June 27, 1921, just a year after my little brother Buddy was born and five years after my birth, so I never really got to know him very well.

One morning, in 1930, as I was getting ready for school Mother answered the phone and then began to cry. When I asked her what was wrong she said, "grandpa didn't wake up this morning," and I instinctively knew what she meant. Grandma Bahn had got up and fixed his breakfast and then went in to the bedroom to wake him up but he was dead, having died of a heart attack in his sleep sometime during the night. He must have gone peacefully because grandma was sleeping right next to him and did not know anything had happened.

There was no work for builders and carpenters during those first days of the great depression and grandpa had taken a job with the city as a street sweeper. The men doing that work used push brooms and it was all manual labor for which they were paid \$5 per day. Not much but it kept food on the table. Such circumstances may have contributed to his death at the age of 68.

A few months before our 8th grade class at Ramona Grammar School was due to graduate we were subjected to a battery of test designed to determine our level of literacy and fitness to cope with the upcoming

rigors of high school. Our parents were evidently concerned and worried about how we would handle the supposed sexual iniquities we would be exposed to in that institution of higher learning and took matters into their own hands.

Mother had a woman acquaintance who fancied herself to be some sort of psychologist. Her name was Dr. Westcott and she had a weird red-headed son Douglas who was either weak minded or slightly retarded. He was very strange to say the least. With the backing of the PTA Mother engaged Dr. Westcott to conduct a short lecture in sex education and it did not involve the birds and bees. It was a little more earthy than that. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter it was decided to lecture the boys and girls in separate sessions. So, one day before lunch, the boys were sent out to play in the school yard while the girls remained in the classroom. During lunch hour we boys noticed that some of the girls had funny looks on their faces and tended to avoid us boys.

As our session began after lunch, Mother introduced Dr. Westcott who then launched full bore into the subject at hand. She talked about uteruses, wombs, birth canals, breasts, testicles and penises, avoiding any references to bowels and their movements. Her talk became quite graphic. The finale to her presentation was a description of actual intercourse which she described as, "like putting your finger in your mouth." How more mundane could she have been?

Later that afternoon we boys took great sport in going up to the girls and asking if we could put our fingers in their mouth or walking up to a girl and putting our finger in our mouth, much to their amusement and sometimes embarrassment.

About a year later Dr. Westcott was taking a trip to the east and her son was driving when he lost control and rolled the car several times bringing his mother's life to an untimely end. It was later determined that the cause of his loss of control was due to a severe attack of

kidney stones.

Once a month on a Wednesday night in those days the City of Alhambra held community sings in the high school auditorium. They were very well attended and the singing was led by none other than the superintendent of schools, Forrest V. Route, a portly fellow with pinch-nose rimless glasses and a booming voice. It was a lot of fun to go to those "sings" with our parents and hear a lot of people, who could not carry a tune, trying to follow the mimeographed music sheets handed to them at the door as they came in. A piano played by an old lady was used as the accompaniment. Eventually they found a way to project the words on a large screen set up on the stage and a ball bouncing from word to word to help the audience keep in time with the music.

The first day at high school as a freshman was a most traumatic experience, getting a locker assignment, locating the proper classroom and trying to avoid the stares of the upper class students. We had all heard some hair raising stories about what happened to freshmen but it all turned out to be nothing more than rumors designed to scare the new kids coming into the school. I still have occasional nightmares about not being able to find my locker or going to the wrong classroom. Then there was the rule that we had to dress for gym and shower after. It was kind of embarrassing since I had never been in a room with a bunch of naked boys before.

The thing I hated most about those showers was the older boys snapping at you with wet bath towels. It really stung when you got hit by one and the older guys were not always careful about where they aimed the towel. So called Physical Ed was probably the thing I hated most and sometimes avoided dressing for gym with the result that I got a one hour "W" for every time I did not dress unless I had a good excuse like, "My mother didn't get them washed yet," or some equally lame reason. A "W" meant one hour after school hoeing weeds at the athletic field or some similar chore under

the direction of the field caretaker.

"Pop" Hughes, the field caretaker, was a pretty nice old man who was well along in years and an easy con target. If you really buttered him up you could work for only 20 or 30 minutes and he would sign you off as working for an hour. That "W" thing was something the coaches had dreamed up and it kept the field looking spic and span all year long. You had to return the "W" slip, with "Pop's" sign off, to the coach who gave it to you in order to clear your record.

That first semester in high school was mostly one of confusion as I struggled to learn the ropes and find my rightful place among the student body. If ever there was a caste system it was at Alhambra High. The social structure consisted of two parts; the "Front Porch Gang" and the "Patio Gang." The Front Porch Gang were the sophisticates, the lettermen, the good looking girls, honor roll students and the social climbers who gathered on the front porch of the building during lunch periods, between classes and after school. The porch, which faced Main Street, was in the center of the building and about a third of the building's width. It had a high ceiling that went up to the second floor and large round Moorish columns across the front at the top of the wide concrete steps that went down to ground level.

The patio was located in the center of the open area in back of the "U" shaped building and faced the gymnasium. The flooring was a mosaic tile and it contained a large 10 ft. by 30 ft. red brick lined fish pond. The Patio Gang were the misfits, financially poorer and low achievers, whose prime recreation was throwing each other in the fish pond. Being the shy type that I was at the time I naturally gravitated to, and became a member of the Patio Gang. I think that I unconsciously felt a little superior to most of them and that gave me a sense of security.

I remember some of the fellows explaining how they could rip the spotlight off a car in 10 seconds flat and the best method of siphoning gas out of someone's

car. A lot of them were constantly in trouble and their sense of humor left something to be desired. Their favorite sport was to run up to some unsuspecting boy, grab the fly in his pants and rip it open, usually ripping all the buttons off at the same time. One day a stray German Shepherd dog showed up and was running around the patio getting handouts from leftover lunches. He disappeared for a few minutes and the next we saw of him he was running back to the patio from the gym wearing a jock strap. I'll have to admit it was a hilarious sight.

In the second semester of that first year I did qualify to be enrolled in the school band and orchestra and had to take my trombone to school every day for band or orchestra practice. I tried riding the bus a few times but it was too uncomfortable and my trombone case was always in someone's way. I finally resorted to walking the two miles from home to school and enjoyed the freedom of not having to conform to a bus schedule and proceeding at my own pace. It gave me time to smell the flowers. I got beat up a couple of times on the way home by the school bullies but the attacks were not enough to discourage me from walking to and from the school.

There was a small and quite pretty teacher, named Miss. Thornton who taught one of the math classes and drove to school in a very little car called an Austin. It was a two seater, that people purchased by mail order, and so small that owners often used the packing crate it came in as a garage. One morning when I was on my way to school with my trombone and about a block from home, Miss Thornton drove by, stopped and offered me a ride. I accepted but we had a hard time fitting me and my trombone in the little car with her. After a bit of shoving, juggling and snuggling we finally made it and I became quite aroused sitting so close to the beautiful young woman.

She pulled up and parked on Main Street right in front of the school and I didn't miss any of the envious

glances I got from the Front Porch Gang as she and I got out of her car. From some of the comments I heard later that day it was obvious that a lot of the kids read more into the incident than it warranted. For whatever reason it tended to raise my status among some of the members of the Front Porch Gang, but not enough to grant me acceptance into their close knit group.

One of my classes at that time was first year Spanish and unknown to us our teacher was a lip reader who taught deaf classes in the evenings. She was really sharp at it and could read the lips of the kids in the back row of the class. She caught me and some of the others whispering snide remarks about her and got her revenge in the end by flunking us which meant going to summer school and taking the course over. I finally got wise and did quite well for the rest of the two years of Spanish. Trouble was I forgot most of it over the years and it only came back to me much later, the circumstances of which will be related further on in this book.

A classmate of mine named Jimmy Edwards used to usher at the Alhambra Theater and after we graduated he borrowed some money from his uncle and opened a movie theater at the corner of Garfield and Hellman Avenues which he named the Monterey Theater. He later changed the name to Edwards. It was the first of his theaters that are known today as The Edwards throughout Southern California.

One large room in the school was used for band and orchestra practice. The only furniture were chairs and an upright piano. There was one little kid, Terry Sterling, who went through Ramona Grammar School with me and was learning to play the piccolo. The head of the music department was a fun guy named "Pop" Ulmer who was also the band and orchestra director. One morning after practice we were fooling around and Pop Ulmer grabbed Terry, opened the lid to the piano and stuffed him inside then jumped up and sat on the lid. We all thought that was very funny, all that is ex-

cept Terry.

I did not belong to any of the clubs, like the debating club, chess club, De Molays, etc., but as I was building model airplanes at the time I did help organize a model airplane club. More about that later.

Evidently my Sophomore year was pretty dull as I can't recall a lot about it other than the fact that I did make the "B" football team and played one season and then gave it up because marching in the band at the games was a lot less strenuous and rough on the body.

There was one thing I do remember about this time but was unrelated to school. As mentioned earlier, my Uncle Raymond was working at the San Marino Police Department. A trustee with the last name of Eggars was assigned to some menial chores around the station as a janitor. Somehow he got hold of a gun and shot his way out of the station and then went to his home and shot his wife to death. A man hunt was started immediately but the berserk fellow eluded capture for over a week and everyone in the area was scared stiff. He was finally spotted in a bar in El Monte and a gun fight erupted when they tried to capture him. He was shot to death in the ensuing battle. Uncle Raymond showed me an 8 x 10 black and white photo of Eggars after his body was taken back to the station. They had pulled up his eye lids and fastened them in place with pins for the photo. I will never forget the picture of that dead guy staring at me with open eyes and three bullet holes in his chest.

Things got a lot better as I developed a greater interest in girls and began going with Peggy Lamb, daughter of our church minister. While my folks were raised as Quakers our church was called the Friends Community Church and the original building had been moved from Monterey Park to a location on Sixth Street just south of Ramona Grammar School. Pop worked on the move which involved cutting the building in half and then putting it back together on the new site.

Mom had organized an all girl Sunday school

class which she taught and provided a lot of fun for the girls. There were about twelve to fourteen of them and they called themselves "The Geisha Girls" a name Mom came up with. I don't think she understood what Geisha Girls were in Japan. Mom and the girls made elaborate Japanese costumes which they wore for special occasions and learned to sing several Japanese songs, but sang them in English. It seemed there were always some of those girls hanging around the house working on costumes and things when I got home from school. A lot of them had gone through grammar school with me.

Anyway, I took Peggy to a school dance and had a horrible time because I hated dancing even though Mom had put me through a ballroom dancing class. I always felt clumsy and awkward, often stepping on my partner's toes. After the dance, our romance cooled and I began going with other girls. I had got my drivers license at age 14 and had use of the family car for special occasions at this point in time. I later had my own car, a 1926 Star Coupester, for which Pop paid \$40.

I had been wanting my own car so Pop said he would get me one if I painted the house and other buildings on our lot during my summer vacation. The buildings were painted bronze green with white trim and it took me all summer to complete the job. The house was a California Bungalow with large overhanging eaves and painting under those eaves with paint running down the brush handle was no fun. We had a family cat at the time, a beautiful long haired silver Persian named Ninita. One day I was high up on the ladder and the cat was laying down below when I lost my balance and knocked the can of paint off the ladder and all over Ninita. The cat screeched and ran all around the yard. Mom came out and we finally got the cat cornered and captured. Mom had a devil of a time getting all that green paint out of Ninita's fur as the poor animal yowled and clawed for all she was worth.

Pop and I spent a couple of months completely overhauling the Star, grinding the valves, putting in

new piston rings, re-lining the brakes and replacing all the wiring, of which there was not much. Auto engines were much simpler in those days. I then painted the car seafoam green and Mom named it my "Green Mari-gold." That car was my pride and joy.

My second cousin, Harry Baylis, who was a couple of years older than me, had been working as a page at the city library for a couple of years and wanted to quit. I was able to get his job and he stayed on with me for about a month of training. The job consisted of putting all the returned books back on the shelves in their proper places. I had to learn Dewey Decimal system which I eventually mastered. I was given a key to the library as I had to do the work when the library was closed. I would go in around 6 a.m. And work until school started at 8 a.m. and then go back at night and work until 9 or 10 p.m. all for the sum of \$25 a month, but that went a long way in those days. Gasoline was 12 cents a gallon and hamburgers were 5 cents each. I was therefore able to keep my car running and my stomach full.

When I really wanted to splurge I would join some of the other high school kids for lunch at Rich's Malt Shop across the street from the school. We had two favorite tricks we would play there. We would carefully remove one end of the paper wrappers on the large drinking straws, dip the closed end in our malts and then blow them up to the ceiling where they would stick. The place resembled the inside of a cave with stalagmites hanging from the ceiling. The malted milks cost 20 cents each.

Our other trick was to take the full glasses of water and turn them upside down very quickly after having put a paper napkin on top of the glass. We would then pull the napkin out and the upside down glass of water would sit there on the table for the waitress to deal with.

At this point I want to revisit Alamitos Bay and the summers we spent there during the prohibition

days. Bootleggers were doing a brisk business in the beach cities and wild parties took place at many of the beach houses during the weekends. We kids would go down the alleys on Monday mornings picking liquor bottles out of the trash cans for what we called our 'whiskey bottle collections.'

Over a couple of summers Bud and I had collected some 100 different bottles, everything from beer to scotch and gin. A lot of them came from Mexico and had interesting labels on them, like American Eagle, Panther Piss, White Lightning and Flying Dutchman along with Vat 69, Haig & Haig, Old Crow, etc. I just wish we had kept them as some of those bottles would be worth a fortune today.

Most of the bottles would have a little residue left in the bottom which we called "droppings." We began pouring all these droppings into one of the empty bottles and eventually had two full bottles of an extremely potent mixture. Not the kind of cocktail any bartender would consider serving to a customer. This whiskey bottle collection played a role in a couple of incidents that will be related shortly.

Our cousin, Allen Bahn Jr., was an accomplished musician and could play any instrument he got his hands on except for strings. He was great on the piano, wood winds and brass. Our music teacher, Tom Memoli, organized a bunch of us into a seven piece dance band that practiced every Saturday morning and Allen was a member of the band. The tunes we played included such pieces as, Tiptoe Thru The Tulips, Up A Lazy River, Blue Moon, Caroline and similar popular tunes of the era.

We played for some private parties and some of the impromptu school dances held in the gym. We finally got a summer booking to play for the cotillion classes that the city sponsored in the Rec. Hall at Almansor Park. We would have to play real slow for the beginner classes and then speed up the tempo for the more advanced kids. It was a real kick to see some of those lit-

tle kids stumbling around trying to do the waltz or fox-trot.

Allen and I made a unique instrument using some of those empty whisky bottles. We built a wood frame from which we hung fourteen of the bottles by a string around the neck. We then filled the bottles with varying amounts of water so they would ring different notes when struck with a marimba hammer. We got them tuned for every note of the musical scale by striking the desired notes on piano keys. We took the contraption to school orchestra practice one day and Pop Ulmer was very impressed and worked it in to some of the pieces the orchestra played. Allen played the bottles along with the rest of us and it really sounded quite good. Ulmer decided to work the bottles into a concert we were going to give at a general assembly.

The top of the wood frame from which the bottles hung was six feet from the floor which brought the bottles to eye level. The floor of the orchestra pit was plain cement. At one point as Allen was playing the bottles to the subdued orchestra accompaniment, he got carried away and hit one of the bottles so hard it broke the string and went crashing to the cement floor scattering broken glass and water in all directions. Members of the orchestra got to laughing so hard we could not play our instruments and Pop Ulmer doubled over with laughter. It was a big hit with the students attending the assembly.

I had a lot of other girl friends at that time, too numerous to mention, usually changing every couple of months. It was around this time that Pop began a major construction project at the site of our home. When the empty lot next door went up for sale Pop, and Mr. Richardson who lived two lots away, decided to buy the vacant lot and split it in half between the two of them. Thus they both ended up with very large lots.

Pop's first project was to build a bunk house for Bud and me to replace the playhouse we had outgrown. The play house was about 10 ft. by 10 ft. with a wood

floor and wood sides 3 ft. high. The rest of the sides were covered with window screening and the roof was canvas. It had a screen door entry at one end. The bunk house was all wood with a composition roof and double hung windows plus French windows at the sleeping end where two single beds were installed along with a dresser cabinet. The building which was 12 ft. wide and 30 ft. long had a work shop with large work bench at the opposite from the sleeping quarters. There was also a table and chairs near the center of the room. Whenever Bud or I had friends stay overnight we slept in the bunk house. Our whiskey bottle collection was displayed on long shelves built into the wall opposite the entry door and above that we had hung some old Civil War rifles that Pop had collected.

Normally Bud and I shared the back bedroom, in the main house, which was warmed by an open flame gas heater. One winter morning Grandma Bahn, who had been staying with us, came down the hall in her flannel nightgown on her way to the kitchen and got too close to the gas heater which ignited her gown. She ran into the kitchen in flames and Mom who was in the kitchen at the time somehow managed to extinguish the flames, but not until after it had burned most of the hair off grandma's head. It was a very traumatic experience for Bud and me.

Another time we were awakened one Sunday morning by a lot of yelling in the kitchen and Pop came in and told us to stay in bed. Later, we found out what it was all about. The night before, during a heavy rain storm, Uncle Allen had been drinking and ran out of booze. Being short of cash but still thirsty he went down the street to a liquor store where he smashed the window and grabbed a couple of bottles. He was immediately arrested and Mom and Pop had gone up and bailed him out. For some reason he resented their involvement and came to our house with a gun to shoot our mother. Pop managed to get the gun away and took Uncle Allen back home.

One of our boyhood friends, Terry Stirling, the kid that Pop Ulmer had put in the piano, stayed with us for several months during a time his mother and father were going through a financial crisis. We slept in the bunk house while he was with us and spent our nights looking at pictures in a magazine called "French Follies" that had photos of naked women in it. Mom caught us one night and burned the magazine following a long lecture.



That's me standing in the results of the big 1931 snowstorm in Alhambra. The bunkhouse is to the right and the old original garage with attached woodshed in background.



Me with my first car, the Star Coupester.



My "Chug" powered by the Smith Wheel used on my bicycle.



My dog Ginger in wedding gown.



Ginger dressed as a house maid.