

CHAPTER V



About the time I entered my third year in high school Pop began a major project on our property in Alhambra. He moved the old garage to the south side of the lot and replaced it with a two story building that had a three car garage on the ground floor and a recreation room on the second floor. He converted his old drafting office into a wash-room for Mom and painted the cement floor with gray waterproof paint. He actually only used two of the car stalls for autos and the third was made into a workshop with bench and power tools.

The upstairs rec. room was accessed by an exterior stairway and the floor was all hardwood. The walls were paneled in knotty pine and storage closets were built into the two corners at one end of the room. The old garage that was moved became a boat house, but more about that later

The construction crew consisted of Harry Baylis and his son, Pop and myself, along with one of our neighbors. It took most of the summer to get the building completed and one of my jobs was installing all the composition shingles on the roof. It was a rather scary job as the roof had quite a pitch to it and it was a long way to the ground. The nice part about it, however, was that I could see all over the neighborhood from my high perch.

A few years later Pop bought an old fashioned Brunswick pool table at an estate sale in Riverside. He

got Harry Baylis to pick it up in his Model T Ford truck and bring it to our place. We had to completely take it apart in order to get it up the stairs to its destination which was the rec. room on the second floor where it provided many years of fun and enjoyment for family and friends. I eventually inherited the table and it went with me on all our moves over the years until I passed it on to my daughter, Harriet, who has it in her home in Prescott, Arizona at this writing. Thus the pool table has managed to stay in the family.

My folks had a friend, Homer Snow, who with his brother made documentary movies. Santa Barbara County was experiencing an infestation of mountain lions and hired a professional lion hunter, Jay Bruce, to reduce the lion population. Bruce hunted with a pack of trained dogs that would tree the lions and he would then shoot them and collect his bounty for each lion eliminated. Homer Snow and his brother accompanied Bruce on several of his hunts documenting everything on film. On one of the hunts they found a cute little motherless cub (Bruce had shot the mother) and Homer decided to take it home and raise it as a family pet.

The resulting film they shot that season was outstanding and they began getting bookings to show it at movie theaters all around California. The film was about an hour long and they had a little stage act that went along with it. Homer had named the cub "Bruce" in honor of Jay Bruce and had trained the animal to do a lot of tricks. He would wrestle with it and had trained it to jump over him while he was bending over. It would play dead and roll over on command and was much like a trick dog in that respect. The cub, which by now was mature and full grown, had somehow broken a tooth off and Homer had it replaced with a gold tooth. The lion loved to swim with Homer in the surf, much to the concern of other nearby bathers.

The Snow's got a three night engagement at the Garfield Theater in Alhambra and they stayed at our house. They kept Bruce outside in the back yard

chained to the clothes line and I would go out and play with him right after his dinner of raw steaks at which times he was particularly docile. We really got along fine together.

I was a Junior in high school by this time and on the second day of their stay with us Homer took Bruce up to the high school at noontime in his special built trailer that resembled a circus lion cage. He and I had prearranged what we would do when he got there. He parked the car and trailer right in front of the school on Main Street and a large crowd of my fellow students were immediately attracted to the site. Homer then offered a ten dollar bill to anyone who would get in the cage and wrestle with the lion.

Bruce was yowling and hissing and really putting on a good show and of course there were no takers at which time I volunteered. Homer opened the cage and I climbed in and began playing with Bruce who was already accustomed to me. We put on a mock fight which probably lasted no more than five minutes but was sufficient to impress the bystanders. Needless to say I exited the cage as some sort of fool or hero depending upon how you looked at it, but my status at school was secured at that moment and I was unequivocally accepted into the Front Porch Gang as one of their equals.

Years later, when Bruce became too old to perform on the stage, he was donated to the Flieshecker Zoo in San Francisco where he was killed one night by a zoo keeper who claimed Bruce attacked him. It later turned out the zoo keeper had been molesting him for some reason or other and as a result the keeper was dismissed and had to pay a heavy fine. We were all devastated by the news which made all the papers since Bruce was a celebrity in his own right.

I was really enjoying high school by this time, getting good grades and dating Betty Bettinger whose father was the superintendent of schools in Alhambra. This furthered my status with the Front Porch Gang as I climbed their social ladder.

In the summer of 1933 Pop and Roy Harris took we boys to see the Boulder Dam, now Hoover Dam, which was under construction. We stayed in the only hotel in Las Vegas at that time. It was named the Sal Sagev (Las Vegas spelled backwards) and it was nothing like the hotels there today. The first night at the hotel we met the world heavyweight boxing champion, Max Bear who was in town to watch his younger brother Buddy Bear fight. Next day we went out to the dam site and stood at the bottom of the structure, which was about two-third completed. We stood on ground that would eventually be the bottom of Lake Mead. Today the water depth at that point is 320 feet. So I can say that I stood on the bottom of Lake Mead.

These were the days of the "hot rods" and a lot of us boys were hopping up Model T's, '27 Chevy's, and Model A Fords. The modifications were sometimes quite extensive and included installing Franklin front axles to lower the car and putting Fronty Heads and twin down-draft Winfield carburetors on the engines. Empty beer kegs were converted to pressure fuel tanks with dash mounted hand pressure pumps. Gear ratios were changed and straight pipes installed to eliminate exhaust back pressure. The results were cars that often topped 100 MPH when we ran them through the electric timed speed courses at Murock Dry Lake in the Mojave Desert, now Edwards Air Force Base.

One of the guys in this group, and a fellow classmate of mine, was Sam Hanks who later got into midget auto racing and later in his career won the Indianapolis 500. He then became president of the Indy Speedway and eventually owned a Buick dealership in Los Angeles. Sam was a great driver and well liked among the racing crowd. He also made a lot of money during his racing career.

Alhambra had an annual event called "Hi Neighbor Days," which included a parade and the high school marching band was one of the attractions. Brother Bud was in the band with me and had been experiencing

sharp pains in his side during the practice sessions in preparation for one of the parades. Our folks were concerned but Bud was determined to march in the parade which he did, only to collapse at the end. He was rushed to the hospital where they found his appendix had burst and peritonitis had set in. He was in the hospital for a month during which time we nearly lost him twice.

Somewhere along the line Pop had run across an old Model T Ford coil and gave it to Bud and me to play with. I made an arc light out of it by plugging it into one of the electric wall outlets in the bunk house and using a pair of sharpened lead pencils as arc rods. It really put out a bright light. That Ford coil got us into trouble a couple of times though. We had found out that every time we played with it the radios in the house gave forth a loud static sound. This gave us a great idea on how we could communicate with our neighbor kids by Morse Code.

I found a roll of unused copper wire window screening in the garage and laid it out on top of the wire clothes lines and then hooked it up to the Ford coil and sparked it with the two wires used on the pencils to make the arc light. The first report we got back by phone was from a kid six blocks away who said we came in real strong on his folks radio. This went on intermittently for several weeks until one day while I was transmitting, a white panel truck with antennas sticking up all over the roof pulled up and parked by our house. Two fellows got out carrying some kind of radio direction finders in their hands and headed for the bunk house and my spark gap transmitter. They said they were from the Federal Communications Commission and got a lot of complaints from people regarding radio interference and had been looking for the source for two weeks.

They said at first they thought it was a doctor who lived up the street where he used some sort of electric therapy device on his patients. They then gave me

a strong lecture while trying to keep straight faces and told me I would never be able to get a radio license from the FCC. Needless to say I was scared and thought for sure I would go to jail. I tore down the antenna as soon as they left.

The other thing we did was much more dangerous and could have resulted in serious injuries. A friend of mine, Marshall LaCour, and I decided to make a bomb and set it off from a safe distance using the Ford coil. I had found a two-piece spun brass tube each half of which had rounded closed ends. The two pieces went together with a slip joint where one half fit inside the other. The tube was eight inches long and 3/4 inches in diameter. We got a bunch of Pop's shotgun shells and emptied the powder grains into the two halves and put hose tape around the joint.

At this point we solicited the help of my brother Bud who was eager to assist us. After all, someone had to hold the bomb while I drilled two holes in it for insertion of the ignition wires. Undaunted, Bud held the bomb in his hands. While I used a hand-held electric drill to make holes on opposite sides of the brass tube. With Bud still holding the bomb, I inserted two pieces of square spaghetti radio wire and soldered them in place using a hot soldering iron. We then wrapped the entire bomb with several layers of black hose tape and then took it out in the yard, about 12 feet from the bunk house, placed it on the grass under a heavy wood box and ran two wires from the Ford coil to the terminals we had soldered into the bomb casing.

We then retired to the bunk house and cracked the door a bit so we could witness the results of our handiwork. When the "All Clear" signal was given I pushed the button on the coil. The resulting explosion was ear shattering and the heavy wooden box disappeared in a shower of splinters. It brought Mom running out of the house to see what had happened and made a spot six feet in diameter completely devoid of grass with nothing but bare dirt showing. There were

no remaining pieces of the bomb visible, but two weeks later Kenny Ingham, who lived one block north of us, found one half of the casing in his back yard.

Pop had now been promoted to Trust Officer at the Bank where his responsibilities involved managing trust funds and properties. One of the properties was the Garfield Theater and the theater manager gave us unlimited passes which were good all year 'round. We sure saw a lot of movies and Bud and I began going to all the Saturday matinees. In order to keep the kids coming back week after week they would run serials, usually westerns, that were about 20 minutes long and always ended with the hero going over a cliff or being shot numerous times at close range. Of course you had to go back the next week to see how he survived which he always did in order to keep the serial going.

One of the stars of those serials was the famous actor Buck Jones who would make a circuit of the theaters, where his films were showing, to organize "Buck Jones Ranger Clubs" and enlist members. For some reason that escapes me I had become fascinated with rope spinning and had become pretty good at it practicing in the back yard. One time when Buck visited the Garfield Theater he had a rope spinning contest on the stage that was open to all comers. I won the contest and Buck immediately appointed me Sergeant in his club with the duty of teaching other kids how to spin ropes. Buck Jones died in the well publicized Coconut Grove Fire on the east coast. He along with some 200 other people were trapped in the building and burned to death.

These were also the days of the touring vaudeville shows and the Garfield Theater was on one of the circuits. Five of us kids from the school band had put together a small dance band that played at the matinees to keep the kids entertained before the film started. We began playing for some of the vaudeville acts and sat in the orchestra pit in front of the stage which also included the traditional theater organ. One night a group of

Spanish dancers was the headline act and as we made our best attempt at playing Spanish music this tall slim gal in a red flamenco dress began twirling around when suddenly her shoulder strap broke and her left breast popped out and began flopping around. It brought the house down and a blush to the confused lady's face as she quickly tried to stuff things back in place. We kids nearly died laughing.

I took Betty Bettinger, who was one class behind me, to the Junior Prom and managed to stay off her feet while we were dancing. I had managed to overcome my fear of dancing somewhat by this time. Mom and Pop let me use the family car that night complete with radio and heater. Since it was in the dead of winter and quite cold I had the heater turned on and the smell of the gardenia corsage I had got for Betty began to overcome me. I got an awful headache which tended to interfere with our petting after the prom while we were parked in her folks driveway. I had her home, over her protests, by 11:30 p.m. which was the deadline her folks had set for me.

As the end of the year approached I began looking forward to becoming a Senior and was totally unprepared for what happened that year. I had begun to take part in a lot of student activities and was a member of the group that headed up the student body. By my own appraisal I was a good looking kid and girls seemed to be attracted to me, but I lacked the courage to carry through on many of the unique opportunities that presented themselves.