

The Gripper Ranch

The Hill House

Another little yellow house. This one atop a sharp round hill with a commanding view of the American River canyon to the northwest. There were mountain lions in that canyon—at least a few miles upstream by Camino. The Larsens said they sometimes sounded in the night like women crying.

But there were no lions on the road going in. East through town, turn left under the railroad trestle, past the pear packing sheds, to the end of the paved road, then a further distance winding by a few low houses on a dirt road through dusty manzanita brush, past the Klingbeil's huge white house on a small hill, through a drop-down wire gate, then a dense grove of live oak trees near the dry creek bottom, up a short, steep, rocky rise to a saddle between the house hill and the pear orchard. Now we had our own pear orchard to care for and harvest—at least it was ours until Colonel Gripper came back from the war.

The orchard sloped gently up to the east. At the north end of the saddle, just before it tumbled down into the river canyon, was an old barn, fiercely dark inside, where odd parts

of old horse riggings, heavily covered with dust, hung on the walls. Must have been many years since the big doors on the end were opened to stir the air and let light in. The top of the house hill was wide enough to allow a gently sloping yard and space to park a car. The house had large windows all around which seemed to let in the whole outdoors. Mama didn't put up any curtains because we had no neighbors within sight and we wanted to enjoy the view.

One afternoon Arlea and I were alone in the house when the sky began suddenly to feel dark and heavy, as if a weight were placed on the air and pushing it down. We stood at the west windows watching for what terrible thing would happen. Far to the north a bright orange streak of light appeared and moved horizontally in a long zig-zag, just like lightning is sometimes pictured in the story books. It went in long, slow strokes from north to south, three strokes traversing the entire sky almost in front of our faces, then around the south side, turned north, slow enough that we could run to the east-side windows to watch it disappear in the north east over the river canyon again. When we described to grown-ups what we had seen, they nodded their heads gravely and called it chain lightning—a very rare event, they said, and we were privileged to have seen it so clearly.* [epilog]

Toward the west the the hill dropped off steeply into a scattering of oak and pine trees with wide areas of grass between. At some distance down from the house water dripped out from the side of the hill, and a growth of giant sword ferns made a luscious green grotto. There were even some rocks to sit on. When I told Mama about it, she put together a picnic basket and the whole family went down to enjoy some relief from the hot summer sun. There were animal trails running along the hill, more or less horizontal, and Daddy said the animals grew legs shorter on one side so they could walk properly on the steep slope. I thought about that and wondered how they could get back where they started—if they had to walk backwards.

South east from the house the ground sloped down gently to a shed for wood and tools. To the left below that the grove of live oak trees stretched up from the creek bottom with wide deep holes here and there in between. Each hole had a jumble of trash in the bottom. Arlea had a bicycle, which was too big for me to ride, but I liked to sit in the low cradle between the wheels with my hands over my head on the handlebars and coast down the hill. Sitting that way I could not reach the pedals but would scrape my feet on the ground to stop instead of using the brakes. One day I went crooked and tumbled into one of the holes. At the bottom I hit my knee on the edge of a big rusty tin can and cut loose a flap of skin below the kneecap. It was bleeding good, and still connected on one side, so I just wrapped a bandage around it and didn't tell anyone. It healed soon enough, but all my life I had a thickening and odd coloration of the skin at that spot for a reminder.

Harry

Daddy hired an old man named Harry McGrath part time to help on the ranch. He told me real cowboy and Indian stories about when he was young in the Jackson Hole country of Wyoming. It was hard to believe some of his stories, but he was serious about them. One of his eyes went crooked sideways, and he was darkly mysterious about how it got that way. Once he told me about when someone got cut up in a knife fight, and an old Indian woman put him back together with a needle and thread, smearing fresh cow manure in the wounds to keep them from getting infected. I wondered if he knew I had cut my knee tumbling into the trash hole, but I didn't say anything about it. He rode an ancient, ragged Harley Davidson motorcycle, which he was terribly proud of, and he bragged about his youthful exploits on it. He liked to

tell how he would set the throttle and stand up on the seat, steering the bike by leaning left and right.

Mama wanted a cement floor in the back porch so it wouldn't get muddy from the splash from the washing machine. Harry was bright to the task, and while we were gone one day he mixed up some concrete and put the floor in. He was proud that he had made the floor with a slope so the water would run out to the side, but the slope rose in a curve up to almost a foot high at the back edge. The only way to use the washing machine there was to set up another wooden floor on blocks, which made it very high to put the clothes in and out of the tub and to feed the wringer.

Birds

Mr. Klingbeil had one leg shorter than the other, much more than Mr. Al Thiele, so it was hard for him to walk, even with a long extension added to the bottom of one shoe. He owned a shoe repair shop in town and was a friendly, jolly fellow. Everybody liked to visit with him in his shop while getting their shoes fixed. He had a machine to stretch the shoes to make them more comfortable on the feet, but it took several days for the machine to do its work. Mrs. Klingbeil was very tall and thin and stiff, and she took care of the ranch. On the side towards our place was a wide dirt field with hundreds of white turkeys. When I went down there, they would crowd against the fence next to me. If I stood close enough they stuck their necks through to peck me. I liked to see how close I could stand without getting pecked, but Mrs. Klingbeil scolded me for it. She said it made the birds nervous so they wouldn't eat and get fat fast enough.

They had a boy named Robert, about the same age as Lawrence. I thought he would be a friend like Lawrence was, but I seldom even got to talk to him. One day I decided to hang around his yard until he came back. I couldn't sit there doing

nothing, so I grabbed a young tree in the front yard, just big enough around to fit my hands, and it made a nice swinging bar as it bent over under my weight. Until Mrs. Klingbeil came out and screamed that I was a wrecker. She complained to my parents that I had ruined her tree, and every time we drove past their place after that, I would look to see if it had straightened up any. It did finally straighten up, except there always was a little crook in it where the bend had been.

I finally figured out that Robert never would want to be a friend to me. He was very serious and quiet all the time because he was going to be a doctor, and he didn't have time to play with the little neighbor kid.

There was another boy, about my age, who lived down the road a spell past the Klingbeils. I tried to make friends with him, but he pointed a BB gun at my chest from only about a foot away and pulled the trigger. It left a dent in my skin for several days.

A little further down the dense manzanita pressed close on the road with wonderful passages and hiding dens from place to place to place where deer had been sleeping. One den was particularly spacious, and I spent some time fixing it up. One day when I came out, I met a girl my age in the road. I wanted to show her my neat place, but she began twittering silly things about love birds and hurried away. I couldn't figure what love birds had to do with my manzanita hide-away.

We had a wire chicken pen by the wood shed, but the chickens mostly ran free around the yard. One day Mama asked me to hold a rooster on a stump-like block while she chopped its head off. It squirmed and squawked so I could hardly hold it still, and when the hatchet came down it jerked loose from my hands and started flying around the yard, blood pouring out from the neck where the head had been. Mama made me chase and catch it. Then she wanted me to pull the feathers out. I didn't eat any of it. I was glad to be a vegetarian.

The Bull

When school started I was alone most of the time. Mama didn't want to send me to school. She said it would be a waste because I already knew everything they teach in the first three grades anyway. She was busy taking care of little Danny. Daddy was working somewhere building a house besides taking care of the ranch, Arlea was going to school, and none of the neighbors wanted to be with me, even after school. So I became a civil engineer. Up in the orchard, between the rows of pear trees, I built roads and dams and bridges and imagined trucks and boats coursing their way through my creations.

The big test came every time Daddy opened the water gates to irrigate the trees. There was a narrow ditch up on the ridge across the dry creek from our ranch where water was always running fast. On our watering days Daddy would pull up a metal slide to let the water run into a pipe to our orchard. The pipe was about eight inches across, and rusty, supported on high beams in an X shape where it went across the dry creek gully, and it was a great challenge to walk across without falling the twenty feet down to the rocky bottom.

We still had our little brown and white Jersey cow, but she quit giving milk. Daddy said he dried her up so she could have a calf and start giving more milk again. One day she began acting funny and making funny noises. Daddy said it was time, and he put a rope harness around her head and began pulling her up the hill to a pasture up beyond the orchard where several cows and a bull were grazing. A man was waiting there, and he opened the wire gate and let us in. Soon the bull came over and sniffed our cow, then he let out a roar and jumped up on her and mated her. Daddy was happy it happened so fast, but he left her there over night just to make sure she got a good take.

A few weeks later she started acting funny again, and Daddy said she was ready to calve. He had tied her up inside her pen, but she broke loose and disappeared out into the brush. When he got home that night, Daddy grabbed a flashlight and took me with him to go find her. We went out into the wild area up the gully from our ranch. He would walk a few steps, then call out in a strange musical voice, "so boss, so-o boss, so-o-o boss." The sound of the words ringing through the darkness shook me in a strange way. Later I read that was the same chant ancient Greek herders used to call their cattle. I don't know where Daddy learned it. Must have been from his father, who heard it from his father, and other fathers going back thousands of years. Finally we heard a soft moo and followed the sound to the cow and calf. She was stubborn at first, but finally she let Daddy put a rope harness on her head, and she followed us back to the pen, stopping and looking back every few steps to make sure the calf was still with her.

After that the cow would now and then break loose and go up to the pasture above the orchard to visit the bull and the other cows. That made the owner of the pasture angry. He ran the Ford Garage in town, and he accused Daddy of turning the cow loose to break down his fence and steal his pasture. The next time the cow came in heat, Daddy had to load her in his pickup truck and take her to another bull.

Rossi

My parents felt sorry for me that I couldn't find any friends around our place, so they made arrangements for me to get acquainted with the new Weldon family who had just moved into a place about halfway between Placerville and Camino. It was a little brown wooden house with a long porch in front that was only a few feet from the edge of Highway 50 going to Lake Tahoe. Mama or Daddy would drop me off

there to play, and sometimes I stayed overnight. I thought they were very rich because Mr. Weldon drove a long black 1938 Buick with extra seats that folded down between the front and back, so the car would hold extra people, and Mr. Weldon didn't have to work. They had come from the San Fernando Valley, near Los Angeles, and Rossi liked to tell stories about that faraway land and his friends there. I listened in wonder to his description of the highways that stacked up over each other four high in downtown Los Angeles. He said they got a good price for their land when they sold it.

Rossi was the youngest of four. Johnny was away to boarding school and soon going to college. We didn't see him very often. Then Grace, a slight, pretty girl with wide straight shoulders and a round face. Then Shirley, with a narrow, angular face and dark russet curly hair that fell below her shoulders. They both became good friends with my sister. Rossi was about two years older than I, about my size, and he had black hair cut short and sticking out every which way like a bristle brush that had been sat on. Mr. Weldon was a short round man who knew everything—or at least knew how to find out everything. One day some kid asked what was on the other side of the world, and he took an atlas and calculated the latitude and longitude and pointed to an island north-east of Australia that would be exactly opposite us, then he talked about the people who lived there and about their lives and customs.* (wrong calculations, failed to figure the right direction from the meridian not as smart as he seemed)

Mrs. Weldon had the St. Vitus Dance* and couldn't control her motions. She could sort of walk, but the family would have to help her get from place to place without falling down. She was very skinny. I thought it was because she couldn't control her motions enough to eat properly. Rossi was especially tender toward his mother, and he would try to feed her, gently holding the spoon near her face and popping

the food into her mouth quickly when she was able to hold it open for a moment.

Everybody liked Rossi, and everybody wanted to be his friend. He was soon the most popular boy in the two church communities of Placerville and Camino. But he chose me to be his special friend and watched over me like a big brother, even though we were about the same size. When people would say mean things and throw things at me, he would scold them and tell them if they wanted to be his friend, they would have to be my friend, too.

Rossi had lots of things—clothes and bicycles and sleds and tools to build things with. We didn't have many things since the fire. I had one pair of jeans to play in, one pair of good pants for church, and two or three shirts for each, and I helped Mama sew my underwear out of the corners of old bed sheets where they weren't worn thin yet. But all that didn't make any difference to Rossi. No matter how much other kids fussed about it, he made me feel equal with him in every way.

Gradually a group of boys assembled around Rossi and me. Mostly around Rossi. I was just there as Rossi's friend. We climbed trees and jumped ditches and dared each other to exploits. There was one boy about our age who was not allowed to play with us because his mother thought we were too rough and her boy would get hurt. One day he drowned at home in his bathtub choking on a soda cracker. We all said if he had been out playing with us, he would still be alive—maybe scratched up a bit, but still alive.

We soaked up the old Gold Rush legends. People told how during the Gold Rush years Chinamen would dig into the side of a hill looking for gold, without any propping or shoring, and often the tunnel would cave in behind them, trapping them forever in their holes. Sometimes while rambling around in the brushy hills we would hear a hollow echo under our feet, and we would imagine breaking through and falling into a hole beside a Chinaman's bones. We would walk some distance apart, so if someone broke through, the others

could go for help. There was one especially strong echo on a ledge high above the creek bed across from our orchard. I found it by accident one day rambling alone through the bush, and I was always afraid to go back there again alone for fear the ground would break and tumble me in along side some bones. I thought I would never get out and my bones would finally just be added to the Chinaman's.

There were a few stray pear trees down in the rocky bottom below the orchard. They were not watered and cared for, and the fruit was too poor to sell. Sometimes we would go down there to make pear fights. I wondered what would happen if the stem of a pear went into my eye.

Rossi taught me how to ride a bicycle in the proper way. He had several, and we would ride up and down the shoulder of Highway 50 by his house with the cars buzzing by. One day I caught the tip of the handlebar on the side of a car, and it made a long scratch from front to rear. The car was overloaded with people, some crowded against the windows above where I was scratching the paint, but it kept on going, and I imagined the family wondering later where that scratch came from. Across the highway from Rossi's house a red dirt bank rose up higher than a two-story house, up to the brush field climbing the hill above. We started making caves and tunnels at different levels. It was a great fun project until a highway patrolman stopped and said we shouldn't do that any more. He said it was dangerous. I thought he meant the dirt falling would be dangerous to the cars going by because I was sure we were safe in the holes we were digging.

Farmers Market

Most of the pear ranchers used big sprayers to protect the fruit against a moth infection. Instead, Mama hung large shallow basins of liquid in the trees to attract and kill the

moths. It was smelly stuff, and lots of work to keep cleaning and filling the basins.

When the harvest came that summer of 1943, they didn't take the pears to the packing shed. Instead, they loaded up the truck and we all went to the farmers' market in San Francisco. That was a wide dirt lot carved out of the side of a hill. On one side was a steeply sloping bank up toward the mint. On the other side it dropped down across the train tracks to the city below. I climbed up to the mint to look at the museum cases of old coins in the lobby, but they weren't interesting enough to look at every day. There were people in stalls all around the lot selling their produce. One of them had a boy about my age who became my friend. A few stalls down from us was a man selling watermelons. And every day he gave a cracked one to me and my friend to eat. I wondered why he had just one broken melon each day. When I carried half a broken watermelon on my head, people in all the stalls looked at me and laughed. It made me feel a little bit sheepish, but the watermelons tasted good enough to bear the feeling.

Down below the market lot men were working near the train tracks. I liked to go down there and watch them, and I liked to feel the swirling wind as the trains went rushing by. The closer I stood, the more strongly the wind swirled, and one day I was just getting close enough to feel a good strong swirl of wind when a working man grabbed me and jerked me away, as if he were saving my life. That spoiled the fun from the wind, and I didn't go back there any more.

We drove every night over the bay bridge to Berkeley where Mama's cousin's Auntie Christine lived. Daddy said that Berkeley was a bedroom community, that people went to San Francisco or Oakland to work and just slept in Berkeley. The aunt had a big house with great high ceilings, three stories high with fancy woodwork on the outside and lots of rooms, and there was a telephone on the wall in the kitchen. It was a big brown box with a black speaking piece sticking out in front and a black hearing piece on a wire hanging from a shiny

hook on the side. One day Arlea and I were there alone, and when the phone started ringing again and again, Arlea thought we should do something about it. It was too high up on the wall for us to reach, so I moved a chair over to climb up on. Arlea picked up the hearing piece, then put it down on the hook again. It quit ringing for a moment, then started again. I thought we should still do something, so I climbed up on the chair and lifted the hearing piece. I heard a woman say, "Those dumb kids are playing with the telephone." We didn't try to answer it any more.

Danger

Daddy was proud of little Danny and loved him to pieces. When we stopped at a gas station or a store, he would cradle his precious baby in his arms and walk around and show strangers his little hands and feet with six fingers and six toes. Only one of the extra parts on one foot actually had a real bone connection. It was a complete bone structure that went all the way up to the ankle. On the other foot and the two hands there was no real bone joint connecting the extra parts and no corresponding bones in the foot and hands. The doctor told Mama that it would be better to leave the one good toe intact and just take off the loose flappers. After the operation Daddy still had the one extra toe and the scars to show off and brag about. Often I heard him say that one of his uncles had only four toes, so the family finally got the missing ones back, thanks to Danny.

When we got back home from the farmers market there was lots of work to do on the ranch, and Daddy worked around the place instead of going out to build houses. Little Danny was nearly a year and a half old already and toddled all over the acres whenever he got a chance. Especially he liked to be close wherever Daddy was. Arlea and I were supposed to watch and take care of him, but he was good at

slipping away from us. One day we couldn't find him anywhere in the house, and when we looked out the window we saw him playing on the ground close behind the dual tires of Daddy's truck, rolling around in the dirt with his bright blue short pants and white shirt. Then Daddy got in the truck, started the engine, and began to back up—directly toward Danny. We were shouting and screaming at him, but he probably couldn't have heard us even if he'd had his hearing aid turned on. Suddenly he stopped, turned off the engine, and just sat there. We ran down to tell him what we saw, and his face turned very white. We were sure an angel made him stop the truck.

Late one afternoon, deep into twilight already, Daddy walked in and said the car had stopped down the road a space before Klingbeils. He took some tools and some parts in his pickup to go down and fix it, but he needed to get both cars home. He took Arlea and me with him, and when he got the car running, he wanted us to drive it home while he drove his pickup. I sat on the floor and ran the clutch and brake and gas pedals while Arlea stood on her knees on the seat and ran the steering wheel and the gear shift lever. We didn't go faster than first gear, but we got the car home just fine.

Discipline

I don't know what it was I did wrong, but Daddy got out his razor strop and whipped me good. I loved to watch him sharpen his razor. It was a long blade, deeply convex on one side, with a narrow curved handle on the end, and it folded into an ivory cage. Somewhere over the years a little piece had broken out of the pivot end of the cage, so Daddy had to hold it carefully between three fingers when he shaved and fold it slowly and carefully back into the cage when he finished.

He had soap in a cup that he worked into a high lather using a brush dipped into hot water in a bowl, then he piled

his face high with it, working the brush around in big circles. Sometimes he would dab some lather on my cheek and pretend he was going to shave me. Then he would pull the razor down over his face in long serious strokes and wipe the foam and whiskers on a fold of tissue paper before he made another stroke. By the time he finished, there would be a row of foam piles mixed with dark whiskers. The whiskers made the foam almost black because usually he shaved only once a week.

Before he began to shave, and sometimes in between strokes, he would stroke the razor back and forth along the leather strop. It made a wonderful slap, slap sound. But that was the same leather strop he used for whipping me. It was about three inches wide and two feet long with a rope loop at one end, which made it a wonderful tool for teaching me a lesson.

I thought the lesson was misplaced. I didn't think I had done anything wrong. So that night I went to Daddy sitting and reading in his chair and pointed him to a Readers Digest article I found about how parents should be kind to their children. Then I ran and jumped into bed. A long few minutes later he came and knelt down by my bed and was crying as he squeezed my hand. But he didn't apologize for whipping me, and I determined to go to live with Rossi.

I waited several days until no one was home, then I took a shovel, better to cut a trail with, and started off across the hills and through the brush in the direction of Rossi's house. It soon dawned on me that the way was a lot longer than I had thought. The shovel got heavy and was more hindrance than help. It was late already before I got there. I spent the night with Rossi. The next day my parents drove up, and they were very serious and quiet when they put me in the car and started back home. I think Daddy never did get his shovel back.

Daddy did treat me better after that, and we got to be good friends. Mama and Daddy talked about how they had been very severe with George and Willis, probably too severe,

and they wanted to be more gentle with Arlea and me and Danny.

My big yellow floppy-eared hound dog had puppies. Too many of them. I think there were seventeen or eighteen at the beginning. She didn't have that many tits, and the puppies crawled everywhere making hunger noises. It wasn't very many days before I started seeing pieces of puppies lying around her. We didn't keep her after that, and I got a short-haired Australian Shepherd boy dog instead. He was mostly black with a bit of rusty color under his chin and some white on his feet. He liked me and ran with me wherever I went, but he hated cars. He would bark viciously and bite at the tires of any car that came by.

Airplanes

On long summer afternoons I liked to lie on my back on the side of the hill and watch the little biplane playing in the sky. It would climb higher and higher until it was only a small speck, then the engine would almost stop, and the plane would come straight down in tight little circles, like the wire screw people used for pulling corks out of bottles. When it got close to the ground, the plane would make a big swoop, the engine would roar again, and the airplane would begin climbing to do it all over again.

I begged Daddy to take me to the airport. It was just a bumpy little dirt strip on a ridge east of Placerville up a steep hill past the church school south of the highway. There were several airplanes there, and I got a close look at the one that played in the sky over our ranch. Later Rossi told me about an airplane that landed too hot and ran off the end of the runway. It went between two trees that scraped the wings off right close to the fuselage. I was glad to see my favorite biplane in the sky a few days later and to know it was not the one that got wrecked.

We talked a lot about the airplanes in the war and the work they did. New designs kept coming out, and we followed the successes of each new one. The Flying Fortress was an ugly thing, with window bubbles sticking out everywhere, but it did its job. The P-40s were hot, especially with the pictures of vicious teeth painted on the engine air scoop. The Hellcat was fat and ugly, but we heard the pilots liked it. I thought the twin-engine P-38 was the most beautiful airplane ever built, but it had a problem at the beginning. Pilots would get into a dive and not be able to get out. Many pilots were lost before they got that fixed. I wondered what the pilots were thinking when they knew they were going to crash and die in just a few more seconds, not from battle, but just from a mistake by the airplane designers. And I thought about my little biplane circling and diving and spinning over my head and wondered what small thing in the design would make such a big difference.

Willis was still in Louisiana. He had advanced to Warrant Officer, I think he was nineteen years old already, and was Officer of the Mess in charge of the mess hall. I thought that was a funny name for a place to eat. He was trying to get into flight school. I hoped he wouldn't be flying a P-38 that hadn't been fixed yet.

He sent me a clipping from the funny pages of the newspaper, a colored picture story about General Benjamin Tupper who did some great things during the American Revolution. I was sure he was one of the ancestors in my line of Benjamin grandfathers, and I was proud to be descended from such a great man.

Besides the airplanes, we talked about the islands with the strange names, and about the evil Tojo, and about the fanatical Jap soldiers that seemed to want to die, and about the booby traps. We made models of different types of booby traps and hid them and practiced watching out for them where we walked. Rossi saw newsreel movies of the war and told me about the places our soldiers were fighting and the

problems they were having. I wondered which island George was on, if he was killing as many Japs as he wanted, and if he was careful about the booby traps. We sometimes got a letter from him, but there was never a word about where he was or what he was doing.

Uncle Levi, who had been a Baptist missionary in China before the war, was flying the hump and translating for the Army. I worried about him in those airplanes struggling to get over the high mountains. It was a great relief when the Burma Road was finished so he could stay on the ground more.

Daddy took me to a place somewhere near San Francisco Bay where blimps were being prepared for air defense. There were dozens of blimps in the air, floating up at the ends of long cables, and some were lying on the ground in a wide grassy area, limp and flat or half inflated. One was open at the bottom with a huge fan blowing air into it to make it stand half open, and we could walk around inside of it. In a dirt field to the side were hundreds of search lights on wagons.

There was worry not so much about enemy airplanes as about the balloons. The Japs hung bombs on balloons and sent them up in the prevailing winds that blew across the Pacific Ocean toward the west coast of America. But I never heard about any damage done by any of them.

Camp Meeting

I was old enough by this time to actually enjoy the camp meeting at Lake Tahoe. But I enjoyed running around and getting acquainted with people more than I enjoyed sitting in the big tent for the programs. Near our tent a man set up a trailer and a machine for spinning ropes out of goat hair, which he sold to the people in the camp. They were beautiful ropes, many different colors along the length. He would gather a batch of goat hair, actually three different batches,

different colors from three different baskets, and feed them into the spinning machine, and he had a pulley set up against a tree some distance away with a cord tied to the end of the new rope so he could pull it tight as it grew longer. I loved watching the rope grow, loved the different colors of the three strands. One day I leaned over to get a better look at one especially nice combination of colors, and my hair got hooked into the spinning rope. I yelled. The man stopped the spinning machine, and they had to cut me loose with scissors. Someone got a rope with a little spot of straight blond boy hair mixed in with the many colors of curly goat hair. Mama gave me a short haircut to try to even out the bald spot.

Pinecrest

By the summer of 1944 Daddy and Mama decided I was old enough to go to summer camp. It was operated by the Conference, and kids would be there from churches all over northern California—different groups, different ages, girls and boys separate, each for one or two weeks. Usually they didn't take anyone less than ten years old. I had just turned eight, but the pastor wrote a letter that I was mature for my age.

I loved the area, in a mountain canyon just short of Echo Summit going to Lake Tahoe, with giant trees all around. But I had a hard time with the camp part. There were eight boys in a cabin, five cabins in each group, five groups around a big clear space with a flag pole in the center. Early every morning a trumpet sound would screech reveille over some awful speakers, and we would go out and stand around in a circle according to our cabins while they raised the flag. Then to the water place with faucets hanging over long tin-lined wooden sinks to wash our faces and brush our teeth with the icy water, then back to the cabin to make the beds, then to line up cabin by cabin again out in the flag circle for inspection before the

day's activities began. The dining hall and the rest of the camp buildings were a long walk across the creek from the cabins. The trees were scarcer over there, and the roads and trails between the buildings were hot and dusty.

One day the whole camp made a hike up the 9,000 foot Ralston Peak—200 boys, plus counselors, strung out for a mile along the trail. The back side, toward our camp, was a steep wooded and brushy slope, and the trail snaked and zig-zagged back and forth as it climbed, but the other side was bare rock that dropped off sharply into the Desolation Valley Wilderness Area. A constant strong wind blew against the face of the mountain and up into our faces. Some of the boys had been there before and knew what to expect. They brought rolls of toilet paper, which they threw out over the cliff making long white stringers in the sky as the wind unrolled the paper and lifted it up higher and higher.

Daddy had taught me how to make a low round whistle blowing over my thumbs into a hollow made by cupping my palms together. It sounded very much like a hoot owl. I could actually play a tune that way by twitching my little finger, but I wanted to make the sharp high whistles the guys made with their lips and teeth. On the way up to Ralston Peak I decided it was time I should learn, so for more than an hour I blew and blew every way I could figure, scarcely getting a whistle sound out at all. Finally the boy in line ahead of me turned around and said, "Learn How!" I said I was trying to learn, and I kept on blowing. On the way back down someone knocked a rock loose high at the tail end of the line, and it bounced down over the switchbacks in the trail and almost hit the head of a boy just a few yards ahead of me. Whistles blew the stop signal, and the counselors all gave us a lecture about being careful.

I joined the woodcarving class and made some little plaques about four inches square with geometric designs on the top side, which I painted bright colors with model airplane paint. The blocks were of Sugarpine, soft and easy to work,

and I liked the sweet smell of the wood. We ate at the same tables as the woodcarving class. At dinner one day I was jabbering away as usual until a guy across from me said, "Tupper, You talk too much." So I quit talking and hardly said another word for the rest of the camp. Then I messed in my pants and got stinky, and I didn't have any way to wash clothes, and the camp began to get miserable.

When I got home, I still wouldn't talk, and Mama wondered what had happened to turn my jabber off. I started stammering after that and had a hard time saying some words. Any sentence starting with a WH sound was almost impossible for me, so I had to learn new ways of putting words together in a way to avoid the difficult sounds. I learned that "how come" was as good as "why," so I got along OK at least for the questions.

But it wasn't long before I started missing the campfires. The campfire place was a semi-circle of rough logs around a large fire pit with a mountain of forest behind and a deep forest canyon before. We didn't use daylight savings time but were on "camp time" so the sun went down soon after supper. Every evening as darkness began to lower over the trees, we would gather and sit in silence waiting for the night to arrive. Then Elder Campbell would step to the front and light the fire. As the flames began to crackle upward, he would lead us in singing, "O, set the campfire burning, we'll sit around the blaze..."* (put entire song in the epilog) Then the stories. Elder Campbell was a good storyteller, and any story he told was fascination. But even more than the stories, I missed the singing. Two hundred boys, along with the men and women of the staff singing together song after song, the sounds floating into the dark forest and hanging between the giant trees. Especially I liked the worship and prayer songs at the close of the campfire each night. My favorite of all was:

*If I have wounded any soul today,
If I have caused one foot to go astray,*

*If I have walked in mine own willful way,
Dear Lord, forgive.* (do full text and melody)*

Then back to the cabins, taps, bedside prayers, and a good night of sleep with the fresh smell of pine and fir needles floating in the open window.

In spite of all the problems, I couldn't wait to go back again next year. Elder Campbell didn't run the camp the next year. There was a new youth director for the Conference named Elder Fillman. He had a son Bobby, just a few years older than I, who played the trumpet, and it was so much better to hear the sounds of a real trumpet ringing through the trees rather than those scratchy speakers—especially the taps at bedtime. Bobby would begin playing softly, then rise to a crescendo, then fade away to almost a whisper at the end. I would lie still in my bed at night waiting for taps to blow, then shiver with delight at the wonderful sound before I went to sleep.

I missed Elder Campbell's stories. Elder Fillman was shy and quiet and didn't tell any stories at all. Instead we got a guy we named Tall Tale Tuttle who liked to talk about his adventures in the South Sea Islands diving for sea shells. I liked Elder Campbell's stories better.

I went back every summer for camp until I was too old to be a camper, then I went as a counselor, and Elder Fillman and I got to be friends. Instead of hiking up Ralston Peak every year, we started doing overnights into the Desolation Valley Wilderness. We had to roll up our sleeping bags the long way and tie them around our necks like a horseshoe, and everybody wrapped a few potatoes and mini boxes of cereal and other things to eat inside. They took us in buses over Echo Summit, then up the west side of Lake Tahoe, and we walked for several hours on a mostly level trail into the wilderness area. Usually we camped at Lake of the Woods, which was actually a jumble of small lakes connected together with channels. We divided up into groups of ten or fifteen and tried to

find places where we could sleep other than on the rocks, or at least find a dip in the rock that would cradle the hip bone without too much aching. One year the teenaged girls of the staff camped just across the bushes from my group. That meant we couldn't go skinny dipping in the lake. And we heard the girls tittering about boys peeking through the bushes at them.

One of my best friends at camp from summer to summer was Kenneth Manning. He was an older man in a wheel chair who had fascinating stories to tell of the many adventures of his life. He had worked as a sound effects technician for a radio station making live radio dramas, and he showed me how to make the various sound effects. Thunder was made by bouncing BBs around inside a tightly expanded balloon. Pouring BBs into a paper cup made rain. Crinkling cellophane made a campfire. Horses trotting were made by coconut half-shells clip-clopped in gravel or other kinds of material depending on what effect was wanted. Other effects were made by squeezing a rubber bulb under water, etc. When he was young he had been on an expedition through unexplored areas of the Amazon, and he told exciting stories about the giant snakes and colorful birds and huge insects and other wildlife. I decided I would surely have an adventurous life like that.

Many of the counselors were teachers on summer vacation from church schools around the conference. One I especially liked was Harriet Eckels, a lady with a really heavy Georgia accent. I liked to hang around her just to listen to her speech, even though her voice was loud and shrill so you could hear her from a long ways away. But sometimes she got a little bit bossy, and I didn't like that. I would decide for myself if and when I would do something she asked of me. Once when I was coming back to the crafts room I heard her through the window telling someone, "That Benny just does everything his own way on his own time." I was proud of that and carried it as a motto of how to handle my life.

Nigger Hill

Since I was past eight years old already, and with everything going on, Mama decided I should start going to school at last. She had a job that year teaching at the Live Oak School down beyond Rescue, but she thought it would be better if I didn't have my mother for my teacher. We lived within long walking distance of the Nigger Hill School, which was up near the Forestry Institute, and it had several rooms for the different grades. There were quite a few families up in that district. Daddy could drop me off there in the morning, and I could take my time walking home in the afternoon.

Since I would be going to school, I needed a medical examination to make sure I wouldn't spread any diseases. Mama took me to a lady doctor in Camino who took care of all the church families in that area. She said I was OK except that I had a heart murmur. That sounded frightening to me—until I learned that she diagnosed almost every child with a heart murmur. I figured if everybody had it, it couldn't be so terrible.

I didn't like school and didn't know what to do. I just sat looking out the windows and wishing I could still run free. The teacher put a pencil and paper on my desk and walked back to the front of the room and began talking again—I didn't know or care about what. Soon the pencil fell on the floor. Soon the paper also. Back again the teacher to put the pencil and paper back on my desk. And again and again the pencil and paper found their way to the floor, to be put back on my desk by the teacher.

I didn't like the walk home either. The afternoons were hot, and there was only a limited number of rocks and cans to kick. And sometimes kids from the school would throw stones at me when I walked past their houses.

At least the recess was good. I taught the kids how to use the waxed paper from their lunches to go faster down the slides, and soon the manzanita brush surrounding the schoolyard was covered like snow with torn bits of white.

After about three weeks the teacher sent Mama a note that she should enroll me in a school for retarded children where I might be able to learn something and fit socially into the environment. Maybe my difficult speech since Pinecrest that summer was part of what made her think that way. So Mama decided to take me to her school near Rescue after all.

Rescue

We drove down through Placerville, down the old Pony Express Trail, past the Thiele place, over the bridge where I had crashed with Lawrence, past some nice ranch houses with white board fences and pretty horses, past Harry McGrath's little tar paper shack, through the great town of Rescue, where there was a firehouse, a small unpainted wooden shack for the Post Office, and another building that looked like it might once have been a store.

The schoolhouse was near the road in a small barbed wire enclosure cut out of a pasture. The area was mostly grass, with scattered oak trees on the low rolling hills. The school was just one room, white, with green window frames and a steep shingle roof, a little porch in front and a little bell tower. But I never heard the bell ring. They said there was something broken in the yoke. Mama used a small brass bell on a handle instead. There was a big black stove near the front and black chalkboards all around wherever there wasn't a window. In the back was a little anteroom with a sink and a place for a stack of wood. The back door opened out to a dip in the scenery down to a little intermittent creek between oak trees with pools of stagnant water here and there. The important people in the community were the Wing family. They had a

big ranch and several children in the school and had a lot to say about what went on there.

Since I had never been to school before, other than the hopeless three weeks at Nigger Hill, and since all the grades were together in one room, Mama let me work at whatever pleased me. I decided what I needed to learn was long division, and that was something the fourth graders were doing, so they said I was in the fourth grade, even though the other kids my age were doing second grade work.

After a few weeks some men built a corral against the road next to the schoolyard. When we came in the morning, we would open the great gates at the pasture end, and by noon recess there would usually be cattle enough in the pen that we could close the gates and have a rodeo. Some kids would sit on the board fence while others roamed around the corral urging the cattle close enough for the fence sitters to jump on. The yearling heifers were the most fun. One day I had just managed to get on the back of one when the bell rang for the end of recess, and the kids opened the gate and streamed back into school. The heifer ran through the open gate, bucking and yawing all the way to the oak trees by the creek behind the schoolhouse, where she ran under a low limb and scraped me off plunk into a watering trough. When I walked late, wet and muddy back into the schoolroom, everyone pretended not to notice.

At the northwest corner of the schoolyard was a giant tree. The limbs were at a good angle for climbing, and we could get up into the topmost parts in several different directions. One day we found a snake wrapped around a limb high up in one of our favorite places. Everyone said it couldn't be a poisonous type, but we stayed a distance away anyhow.

The people in the community decided to have a social and dance in the schoolhouse. We didn't believe in dancing, but we could take part in the social. Each of the young ladies brought a fancy decorated basket of food. The baskets were all lined up on the teacher's desk at the front, and one of the

men started an auction chant, like a loud and fast stuttering, to see who would pay how much for which basket. The winner of the auction for each basket got to eat with girl who had brought it. It was supposed to be a secret which girl brought which basket, but the way the auction went, it seemed some people knew already. Maybe some of the girls had let certain of the boys know. After we ate, the desks were shoved against the walls and we played some circle games. The hot potato and musical chairs games got everyone moving around and laughing a lot. After awhile some men got out their fiddles for the dance. We left before the music started.

Sometimes to save the the long drive back and forth to Placerville we would stay over during the week in a little house behind the school. It had been empty for a long time and was not in good condition, but we saved a lot of time and gas money from driving. The war ration cards didn't allow for enough gasoline to drive every day back and forth. One man told me he had to put gunny sacks over the headlights of his large fancy car in order to get it past a gas station—if it could see the gas pumps, it would stop no matter how hard he tried to steer it otherwise. After school was out and the kids were all gone home, I had long empty afternoons that I tried to fill exploring what little there was of the creek. One thing that fascinated me was the large number of hair worms. These were like the the hairs from a black horse tail and mostly more than a foot long. If you watched them for a long time, you could see them actually swimming from place to place in the quiet stagnant water.

In the school library was a book called "The Stars for Children."* It was a story about how an Englishman taught his nieces and nephews about the stars, and the stories behind the constellations, by putting little pebbles in the sand. I lived through the book intensely and went out at night to see the stars described in the book, page by page and chapter by chapter.

I got curious about smoking and decided to give it a try. Down at the front corner of the school yard was a tumbled down shed that looked like a place to hide. Nobody would ever look in there for anything. With a handful of matches, and a few minutes to roll some cigars out of green fig leaves from the tree close by, I was ready. I tried one "cigar" after another, but they all tasted awful, and the smoke burned hot and sour in my throat no matter how tightly I rolled them. Then Daddy drove into the school yard by surprise, and I threw down my experiment and ran out to greet him, hoping the smell of the smoke wouldn't give me away. I never tried anything like that again.

There was a big controversy about a plan to build a high dam near Folsom. It would flood the whole lower American River valley, even cover the John Sutter mill site at Coloma where John Marshall had discovered gold and started the Gold Rush. Our school would have been near the edge of the lake, and many of the ranches in the area would be destroyed, including the Wing's. Finally the controversy was over, and we relaxed with our rodeo and games the rest of the year.

Arlea was eleven years old, and Harry decided it was his responsibility to tell her all about woman things that she could look forward to. Some of his descriptions must have been tough, because she was bad upset for a long time. Mama was upset, too, but it was too late to do anything about it.

Whenever Mama thought I was constipated, she would cut a sliver of Ivory Soap about two inches long from a corner of the bar, pull down my pants, and stick it into my rear.

Billy

My calf was almost as tall as I already, and he was my pet. He would come when I called his name and eat out of my hand. If I let him, he would lick my face. I was sure that was his way of kissing me. One day Daddy loaded Billy in his

pickup truck and drove him down to Rescue—to a pasture across from the school and up the road a spell. There were several men there with other young cattle. Daddy tied Billy to a tree, then loaded a shell in his rifle. Billy sensed something bad was going to happen to him. He looked anxiously at me and bellowed some short nervous bellows, but I had to just stand there and watch. Daddy shot him once in the forehead, and some brain squirted out of the hole as Billy toppled over sideways. Then Daddy ran over and sliced a big wedge out of Billy's neck to let the blood run out on the ground. It came in spurts for awhile, then slowed to a drip. After he almost quit bleeding, the men helped Daddy hoist Billy up by a rope around his rear ankles to the limb of a tree. More blood came out. Then Daddy took out his knife again and made a big slit down Billy's belly and cut the guts loose until they all fell out onto the ground. Then the hide came off. Soon there was nothing left of Billy but pieces of meat. Daddy had rented some storage space in a freezer in town and put most of Billy there, but he took some home, and Mama put some parts of Billy in the refrigerator and cooked some of them for supper. I couldn't stand to look at pieces of Billy on the plates and had to leave the table.

Danny

He was nearly three years old already and talking fast and loud—jabbering, actually, mostly about nothing, but it was fun to listen to him, and some sentences were beginning to make sense. Sometimes he had difficulty breathing, and the doctor told Mama he should have his adenoids removed. Mama went with him into the operating room to help. Danny didn't like it, resisted the ether, didn't go all the way under, and didn't like the cutting they were doing on him. He yelled and screamed for Mama to help him, but she just stood there and helped to hold him down.

He quit talking completely after that for several years, and when he did start talking again the words didn't sound like English words at all. And he didn't trust to be alone with Mama for a long time after.

Caroline

Harry McGrath turned up one day with a bride. She was about forty years younger than he, maybe seven or eight years older than Arlea. Round and pink and plump with baby fat and with curly blond hair and bright blue eyes and a happy open smile. She hadn't been very much to school, and there were lots of things she didn't know, but Harry adored her and watched over her, and she seemed proud of him. He got a sidecar for his Harley Davidson, and she loved sitting in it with a bandanna over her hair streaking through the wind.

Now that he had a wife, Harry tried to be more socially outgoing. He got some better clothes and started teaching the Sabbath School lesson at a little church down by Shingle Springs. He told me the church members objected sometimes to his graphic illustrations of the lessons.

They invited me to visit in their home over night. It was the first time I had been inside his house. Always before we just drove by while I wondered what such an ugly little tar paper ramble would look like inside. Actually, it was bigger inside than it looked from the outside, partly, I think, because it was up the hill a few yards and from the road we could only see the front wall. There were several rooms leading off the small living room. The kitchen was in the back and was pretty well fixed. And there was a nice workshop behind that with some good tools neatly ordered on the walls. A short space behind was a small barn with a horse in it. The living room floor was covered all over with boxes of books and magazines so that you had to step carefully in the spaces between in order to get from one side of the room to the other. Some of the

books looked interesting, and I understood suddenly how Harry knew so much about so many things, never having been to school a day in his life.

There was a girl about my age there staying with them — Caroline's niece. When it came bedtime, after Harry and Caroline had turned in for the night, she asked me if I would like to come sleep with her. When I said no, she acted sort of embarrassed and said she just wanted to save Aunt Caroline the work of making up the extra bed after I was gone. I left the next day, and I never told Harry or Caroline anything about it. Harry would bring Caroline around to our place a lot, and she and Arlea became friends, but I never saw the girl again.

Harry bought another horse and wanted me to ride with him the eight miles to bring it home. We rode together on one horse over to the ranch, then I rode on the new horse back, without a saddle. It was a strange beautiful mottled blue-grey color with a wide flat back. And it bounced as we trotted along. Every step the horse took, I bounced up a few inches and came down hard with a thump against the horse's back that was rising for the next trot. By the time we got it home, my stomach was a froth, and it was several days before I could eat properly again.

Peace

The war finally ended, and George came home. He didn't talk much about what happened over there, but he showed me the purple heart he got from the landing at Leyte with General McArthur. I think he never showed it to anyone else in the family. He said he got the medal because he took shrapnel in his belly during the landing. A truck got stuck trying to drive across a damaged bridge over a gully. It was in the way of everything and holding up the invasion. No one wanted to drive it because it was too exposed. But George went ahead and got wounded doing it. He said he was more

worried in the hospital tent than on the battlefield because the Jap pilots used the medical red cross symbol for a target to aim at. Maybe the shrapnel in his belly saved the lives of many other soldiers. George wouldn't talk about that. What he mostly talked about was the photograph of McArthur wading ashore. He complained how the soldiers did all the work and McArthur took the credit with his fresh clean clothes and his big grin.

George bought a car and came to visit us often. He would race up to the saddle, the tires spitting rocks and dirt out behind him, then grind up the hill to park by the washing machine porch. My little dog didn't like that. He would try to stop the car by biting at the tires even more viciously than other cars. George didn't like my dog. One day he made a quick jerk with his steering wheel and drove right over my dog's head. He yowled and barked and rubbed his head with his paws. It was sharply oval for several weeks, but it finally grew mostly back into shape. He got really mean after that, and we had to put him away.

Sometimes when George came, he would get busy building something. I always wondered how he could hold so many nails in his mouth and what would happen if he swallowed some of them.

One day when George was there for one of his regular visits, Colonel Gripper came by to see his ranch, and the two of them chatted for awhile before they both realized that they were breaking military protocol. Since neither one had been formally discharged from the Army yet, George should have saluted and said "Sir" and stood at a respectful distance. They both had a good laugh over that, and they got to be friends. Colonel Gripper was especially eager to hear stories from the battlefield since he had spent the whole war in an office in Moscow.

The end of the war brought many changes. We could get real tires again for the cars and trucks instead of shaky re-treads. There was enough gasoline to go wherever we

wanted, and we could drive faster than thirty-five without getting into trouble. Girls started wearing longer skirts. One of the favorite styles was called the Ballerina. That was a full circle of cloth that hung down almost to the ankles in nice curves, and the girls would spin and make the skirt flare out wide. One of the girls at church had a dark blue one. I thought it was pretty, but Mama said she was just showing off.

Dr. Jean Babcock got the first new car in town. It was a dark maroon Chevrolet coupe with a long sloping tail and a shiny grill in front and shiny bits of chrome here and there all over. She took care of the people in Placerville, and we liked her better than that woman up at Camino.

Many of the new cars looked very different from the ones before the war. Mostly they were fatter and rounder with bigger fenders and bigger hoods. The new Ford swelled up like a balloon compared to the 1941 model. The first Studebaker was just a re-issue of the last model before the war. It would be hard to even tell them apart. But the next model was the most radical new look of all. Instead of a little back window to peak through, like almost all of the pre-war cars, large windows went all the way around the back in a big semi-circle. And below the windows in both the front and back the body was slanted and pointed. Some people said you couldn't tell if the car was coming or going. I thought it was an exciting car and wished Daddy would buy one.

The Willys company didn't offer any new cars. I missed their design of the older cars with their high bulbous hoods reaching forward and with a wide low swoop up from the bumper between the fenders and the engine hood. Instead they kept making jeeps almost like the ones they built for the war, trying to adapt them for civilian use. They put on displays of plows and other farm implements that could make the jeep work like a tractor. I don't think they sold very many of them. But they sold lots of plain Jeeps for road use. Many people preferred the pre-War Willys to all other cars because of the overdrive in the transmission. There was a knob on the

dashboard, that when you pulled it would shift all the gears a step higher and put the drive into a free-wheeling condition to save gas. But it could make the brakes work harder when time came to slow or stop.

Among the rush of new inventions was the ball point pen. This was a marvelous thing because you could write in ink without danger of spilling all over your clothes, and you could press hard enough to make a showing through the carbon paper without breaking the point. But they were expensive. Someone in the church paid fifty dollars for one of the earliest ones. We thought that was foolish. She could have waited a few weeks and got one for less than five dollars. Even that was enough for a week's worth of groceries. Daddy complained that things were suddenly getting so expensive that he could carry five dollars worth of groceries out of the store in his arms.

Soon the conversation turned to moving again, and Pollock Pines was the only quick solution.