2020

The Bird, the Oak, and the Stories that Build Us

Alicyn Newman
Western Kentucky University, alicyn.newman408@topper.wku.edu

THE BIRD, THE OAK, AND THE STORIES THAT BUILD US

A Capstone Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts

with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction

at Western Kentucky University

By

Alicyn K. Newman

May 2020

*****

CE/T Committee:

Dr. Kate P. Horigan, Chair

Dr. Tom Hunley

Dr. Jeffrey Budziak

ABSTRACT

This is a project combining creative writing and oral history research surrounding the life of my late grandfather, Kenneth Wesley Newman. In its pages, I delve into memory, history, and storytelling, seeking to identify which stories have held meaning for my family over time, and why. I have written my way chronologically through my grandfather's life and interwoven his narrative with what I know now, what I remember, and the stories we continue to tell as a family. The interdisciplinary nature of this project led to a combination of creating writing and research, which included reading war-era letters, watching home videos of my grandfather telling stories before his death, and conducting informal oral history interviews with members of my family. While part of this project is about oral history preservation, it is also about exploring the meaning my grandfather's stories have gained over time, and how they have built us as a family.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my family, who gave me the stories.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank both my father and my aunt, Stephen and Gwen Newman, for sharing their pasts and their stories with me. Thank you as well to other members of my family—my mother Leslie for always supporting my writing dreams, and my cousin Casey, a fellow poet and old soul. Thank you to both the English and Folk Studies and Anthropology Department faculty who have given me the best college education I could have asked for—one that has challenged me and allowed me to pursue the studies and projects I am passionate about. Thank you to Dr. Kate Horigan for encouraging, supporting, and guiding me through the process of telling my family's stories, and discovering their meanings in the present; to Dr. Tom for bringing my inner poet to light and challenging me to think creatively about how to say much, with little; and thank you to the Mahurin Honors College at WKU for encouraging me to pursue excellence in my studies and my craft—and to pursue new horizons.

VITA

EDUCATION

Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY — May 2020
B.A. in English – Mahurin Honors College Graduate
Honors Capstone: *The Bird, the Oak, and the Stories that Build Us*

Home School Graduate, KY — May 2016

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Allen County Public Library — June 2017-
Library Assistant — April 2020

Arts Alive! — June/July 2018;
Summer Camp Staff — June/July 2019

AWARDS & HONORS

Potter College Creative Arts Scholarship, 2016
Mary Ellen and Jim Wayne Miller Celebration of Writing, 1st Prize, 2017 (Poetry)
Mary Ellen and Jim Wayne Miller Celebration of Writing, 1st Prize, 2019 (Fiction)
Outstanding Folklore Minor Award, 2020

PUBLICATIONS

"My Heat is a Jungle." *Zephyrus,* 2017. Print. (Poetry)
"Silent Riot." *Zephyrus,* 2018. Print. (Poetry)

STUDY AWAY & INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Faculty-Led Study Away Honors 251 in Washington, DC — June 2017
Faculty-Led Study Abroad: Cititzen and Self in the Salish Sea — June 2018

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: English (Creative Writing)
Minor Field: Folklore

CONTENTS

The Bird, the Oak, and the Stories that Build Us

Alicyn Newman

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a work combining creative writing and oral history research. In it, I have included quotes from home video footage, informal oral history interviews that I conducted with my father, Stephen Newman, and my aunt, Gwen Newman, and the letters my grandfather sent home during the second World War. I have used ellipses in this project to indicate omissions from quotes, rather than a pause in speech, and brackets to offer clarifying information. Italics are used consistently to indicate that a given quote is directly from my grandfather. Additionally, I have left these quotes as they were written or spoken, including misspellings, grammar errors, and variations in name spellings in order to replicate my grandfather's voice—and the voices of friends and family—as authentically as possible. Finally, I would like to extend my appreciation to the Library Special Collections at WKU for the use of the image depicting the Trammel, KY plane crash of 1943.

CHAPTER I: THE BIRD AND THE OAK

As I remember it, we found the baby bird sitting alone in the short-clipped grass, tiny, pale, defenseless.

I bent to get a closer look. My grandfather's tall figure shadowed me and the bird. We had been on our way to the barns, but a baby bird in our path was worth stopping for. I don't remember our exact conversation, but it must have gone something like this:

"Can we help it, Pa?"

'Course we can…let's see if we can find something to put it in.

With my grandmother's help, we found an empty matchbox and lined it with a soft rag. We scooped the baby bird into it. To this day I have no idea what tree or branch it had fluttered down from. It was little more than a hatchling with thin wisps of down, translucent skin, and bulging eyes above a beak that kept opening for food.

Nana rummaged in some drawers for an eyedropper while Pa disappeared behind the shed with a shovel. She helped me slip the edge of the dropper into the bird's yawning beak and squeeze a few droplets of water in. By that time, Pa had come back with a handful of earthworms. He cut one into small pieces and we fed a few of these into the yawning beak, too. The bird's skin was so pale that I remember watching the pieces slide down its throat.

We kept it in the warm kitchen where it rested in the matchbox. Soon, my parents came to pick me up, and I left the bird in Pa and Nana's care. They promised to watch after it for me.

I was seven years old.

*

The next day, I got a call from Pa and Nana, and they gently explained that the baby bird had died. They had done all they could.

I was disappointed, as all children are when they rescue an animal only to lose it a few days later. Loss was a tough blow for a seven-year-old.

When we visited Pa and Nana's a few days later, I noticed something new as I got out of the car. Under one of the maple trees lining their driveway, a fresh patch of earth had been dug, only a little bigger than my hand. When I took a closer look, a small, white ceramic tile had been positioned like a headstone in front of the tiny burial plot.

Pa had given the baby bird a proper burial.

At the time, I didn't realize the significance of it. My parents tried to explain it to me, a little amused: "Alicyn, Pa did that just for you." I thought that was simply what you did for baby birds that had died.

But time gave new meaning to memory. At some point over the years, the ceramic-tile-headstone disappeared, the baby bird forgotten by all but me. Pa and Nana both passed away, Pa a couple years after the bird, and Nana when I was in my teens. The farm slowly disappeared with them: barns were emptied, belongings were distributed and donated, and finally, the land and stone house were sold out of the family. That thread of

my childhood, the one that had wound itself among faded red barns, plum and pecan trees, and through the stones of the house—seemed sold with it.

I remembered the bird, though. And Pa, whom I knew for nine years, which wasn't long enough.

*

There are some people you don't appreciate until you're older. Or until you've lost them.

Pa was one of those people. I loved him as a granddaughter loves her grandfather, and I knew he loved me. But somehow, loss brings a bittersweet appreciation, a desire to know more about someone than you knew about them while they lived.

He was my father's father, and I appreciated him in the childlike way of looking forward to walks around the farm and to warm hugs, enveloped in the soft flannels he wore so often. I appreciated him for what I knew about him: his laugh was infectious, he was a bit of a trickster, and he'd been to Japan. He played the jaw harp, he'd memorized long poems and tongue-twisters, and he liked horses. He was tall and lean and tough like an oak tree, and he built things. Barns, toolsheds, playhouses for his grandchildren.

He and Nana lived in an old stone house that was family-built in 1935. It had small bedrooms, a kitchen with a linoleum floor, a dirt cellar, and a living room with green carpet that stayed cold and smelled like old books. Once, Pa and Nana led us through all the small closets and cubbyholes upstairs, even into the attic, and I was amazed that a house could have so many hiding places.

And he told stories. It seemed that every sentence or moment that meant something to him was folded up carefully, tucked in his pocket for use the rest of his life.

From him came the stories that my dad would tell me, or that would be brought up at family gatherings around the dinner table or living room—stories that would have us all laughing or nodding silently in memory.

Through the years, I tucked the stories away too, sewing them into my patchwork of memory. As college approached, majoring in English became the natural choice: I loved words, and I came from a line of storytellers, after all. My studies, eventually, would teach me that stories are significant, holding meaning, values, legacies. They are not trivialities: instead, they have the power to tell much, with little, and tell it in a way that is accessible to both the young and the old. Stories, I learned, are powerful.

That is how I came to the idea of writing my grandfather's stories. And, in writing them, exploring what they truly mean to my family, and to me, today.

We are made from the lives that come before us—our family's physical traits, mannerisms, ways of thinking, values—and sometimes the best way to find out where all the pieces came from is to look back. That is the work that follows: my looking back, my gathering, my collecting the stories that have worked themselves into my family's repertoire. The amusing ones. The serious ones. The heartfelt ones.

What follows is a reconstruction of my grandfather's life, an exploration of the individual stories woven through his narrative and the value they hold to us—to me. They are stories of people, of loss, of laughter, of Kentucky, of a war on the other side of the world, and of home. While these stories live on when shared among my family, I want to give life to them in the way that I tell stories—as a writer.

Some of the stories are memories shrouded by time. Some of them have a beginning, a conflict, and an ending, the typical structure of a narrative. Some of them are

hardly more than a phrase that Pa added to his collection. But all of them have, in some way, contributed to who we are as a family, to who I am today. They are to us what photo albums or scrapbooks or diaries may be to other families: a collection of the moments that we find worth holding onto, the moments that define us. They've been passed down through telling after telling, details varying here and there, but the bones remaining the same.

For example: I don't remember what my grandfather said about the baby bird. I don't remember who found the matchbox. I don't remember whether it was Pa or Nana on the phone calling to let me know the baby bird had died. But I remember that Pa was with me when we found it, and that he disappeared behind the shed to dig up some food for it, and that he buried it with a headstone the next day so that I, his seven-year-old granddaughter, wouldn't be so sad. The details that are important have stood the test of time.

*

What follows is a journey into memory and story, into the details that I find difficult to remember and the stories that are hard to pin down: what happened? which version is the correct version? are all the parts here or are some missing? It is my effort to gain a clearer, more connected vision of who my grandfather was beyond the man that I knew for nine years, who rescued a baby bird for me, who stood tall like an oak tree, a central figure to our family and community.

I think the decision to look back to the people whose lives led to ours is an effort to understand ourselves more clearly, too. In the stories, we find ourselves—or who we want to be.

Here, I am telling the stories to do my part as best I know how, keeping them alive and learning from them as I learned from my grandfather himself. And, as a writer, I am giving them my own unique perspective, as each members of my family does when it is their turn to tell the stories. Here is my effort to close the gap between past and present, to step into my family's legacy of storytelling and explore what my grandfather's stories mean to me.

We all have stories. We are stories. We are built by stories.

CHAPTER 2: "THAT WILD BOY"

My grandfather remembered the day he was born.

In a home video recorded one September night in 2007 before his death, he and other members of my family were trying to recall people from the community in which he'd grown up.

"You remember Doctor Aleck real well, I'm sure," my dad said.

Oh yeah, Pa laughed. *Yeah, I remember him real well*.

"How come you remember him?" my grandmother, Nana, asked.

Well I was with him when he carried me down to the old homeplace to deliver me, Pa said. *I saw Harold and Hollis playing out in the yard when we went by there, you see…he had me in some kind of a bag. Had to be. But for me to remember it, that's—that's just a little bit unusual.*

He told the familiar story from the old leather armchair that I remembered from childhood, the one with yellow stuffing visible through a crack across the headrest. On the TV screen, half his face was cast in warm light from one of Nana's lamps, the other half in shadow. He told the story with a gleam in his eye.

This story was one of many I knew about my grandfather, though I have heard a version in which he waved to the boys he and the doctor passed. Perhaps he told it several ways—however he felt like telling it each time.

My grandfather, Kenneth Wesley Newman, was born in Allen County, Kentucky, to Curt and Fern Newman, October 11th of 1922. He was the second oldest, three years after his sister Gwendolyn. Six years later the youngest came along, a redheaded girl named Virginia Ruth. Some called her by her middle name, Ruth. Pa called her Ginny.

They first lived in a house that was little more than a shack, and it was there, in his childhood years, that his rootedness for home and the seed of determination that runs in our family was first planted. Throughout his life, it would take a lot to faze him. He made up his mind to do things, and he did them right, from an early age.

Hitting the sun with a rock, however, was one challenge he would ultimately lose.

The story, as I've been told, went something like this: Pa was three, maybe four. He came upon a nicely sized stone for throwing. He knew if he threw it hard enough, it could hit the sun, so he threw it as hard as he could, straight up.

I imagine him, the small, brown-haired, hazel-eyed boy he was, watching the rock sail skyward until gravity began tugging it back toward the earth.

*I was going to hit the sun with a rock and, I must have but it bounced back and tapped me on the head…*In the family video of Pa retelling the story, he ran his fingers over his scalp. *Right along up here, blood run down and—I think—dripped off my nose a little bit.*

Nana asked, "Did your mother hear you squalling?"

Oh good granny, she was right out there with me when I did…the dastrous deed.

Young Kenneth, 1930

It turned out that trial and error was Pa's way of learning. Around the same age, he recalled the first time he learned how to cut a blade of tobacco. As he told the story in the video, he bent over in his seat, untying his shoe and working to pull off his sock in search of a scar.

[Dad] had had tobacco up in the orchard…and he was cutting it and I wanted to cut a blade of tobacco, well he had his knives all sharpened up and in good shape. He gave me one and showed me, said now: you did it just like this, said you split your stalk down and lay it forward and that'll cut it off. Well I did, I cut it off and the knife went clean on through and hit that ankle bone right there, laid it open…I remember him picking me up and he just took a hold of that ankle with his thumb over the gash like that, carried me to the house, 'course I was screaming bloody murder. Mom wrapped it up and I don't remember what she put on it, it didn't take it long to heal up.

Around the time of the tobacco-cutting incident, Curt was building a house on property he'd bought close to where they were living at the time—through a section of forest and over a couple of hills, as the crow flies. Pa remembered joining his father to work on the new house one day when he was a little boy, and by the end of the day being very, very tired. *I was begging Dad to go home,* he said, *'course he wasn't going to go home until he'd put in a day's work.* Late in the day, a neighbor stopped by with some news.

"If you knew what I know, you'd be wanting to go home worse than you are now," the man said. *Well that just set me on fire*, Pa recalled. *I had to know what was going on. He said, You caught a possum*.

The neighbor had seen the possum caught in a trap that Pa remembered Curt helping him set, and the neighbor had taken it to their house. After the day's work was done, Curt took Pa home and killed and skinned the possum, to Pa's disliking.

I wanted to keep that possum, I thought he was cute, he said. *Dad knew better than to try to do that*. He couldn't keep the possum, but he got a dime for its hide—a lot of money for a little boy in the 1920s.

They moved into the new house through the woods and over the hill for a time, maybe a year. Pa remembered the possum, and the tobacco injury. He remembered, too, how he was protective of his mother from an early age. Once, he threw a fit over his father making a show of kissing his mother. He couldn't tell the story without laughing: *I grabbed him around one leg and was a frailin' him with my fist just as hard as I could, and it was ticklin' him to death—I was—I couldn't—I couldn't've been over four years old…I couldn't stand for Dad to hug Mama—he grabbed her, 'I'm gonna kiss your*

Mammie! I'm gonna kiss your Mammie!' Boy I jumped on him, I was frailin' him for all I was worth.

There was a Sunday, too, when he ripped his mother's dress in church when she was called up to play the organ. When asked about it, he recalled, *Oh me, I couldn't stand that either. That was over at old Antioch* [Church]*. They called on Mom to play and I was sittin' there by her and when she got up and started I reached and grabbed her by the dress and just tore a streak out of it…I just couldn't stand the men standing around the organ.*

He had these memories of his first years, but they were few.

Don't remember much about Dad, he said, when asked about his father. Curt was known for his musical giftings. *I don't remember ever hearin' him sing, just practicing there at home by himself… I wasn't but six years old when he died. I don't remember much about him.*

Pa was called to Curt's bedside one day, where Curt told him, "Son, you be a good boy and help mother." And that was Pa's last memory of his father.

Curt Newman died of complications with pneumonia and the flu, leaving behind a wife and three children: Gwendolyn, age nine, Kenneth, age six, and Ginny, who was only four months old. His obituary read that he "lived nobly and died serenely."

At the age of six, Pa became the man of the house.

He had a lot of growing up to do before being able to step into his father's shoes, but he grew up fast. His mother never remarried. She was unable to keep the new house, and they moved back to "the old homeplace," across the hills and through the woods—the place that was little more than a shack.

Pa said that from inside the old house, they could see daylight through cracks in the walls. Keeping in heat during the winter was a joke. They each had a blanket-draped rocking chair that they pulled up as close to the fire as possible, and after coming in from outside chores, they would leave on their coats and sit by the fire until time to go out again. They would talk, read, maybe listen to the radio.

The first few years of widowhood with three young children were difficult for Fern. She was able to arrange for a couple of men from the community to come work the farmland for her, but it was soon apparent—to her, and family members looking out for her—that the men were financially taking advantage of the arrangement. She felt she had no other options.

Then one day, with no warning, the men quit.

My great-grandmother was a woman of faith, a faith that she passed on to her children, and to her children's children. The stories I heard about her as I was growing up were, in large part, stories about her close relationship with God and how He spoke to her at different moments in her life, especially in times of hardship. The day that the men quit led to a story that has been passed down through generations, to words that my father and aunt quote by heart.

Fern left the children in the house that day, got down behind the barn on her knees, and started praying. We don't know the exact words of her prayer, but we know she asked for help, for God to step in. As a widow with children in the 1930s, it was, for her, a matter of survival at that point.

When Pa recounted the story, he said that his mother was given an answer to her prayers so clearly, it was as if a voice had spoken aloud to her. “I don’t need those two men,” Fern heard. “Don’t you worry, now. My resources are inexhaustible.”

This was how Pa told his mother’s story. I’ve heard other versions circulate down through my family, in which Fern heard, “I don’t need those two men. You trust Me. My resources are limitless.” Other members of my family say she did hear an audible voice. Regardless of the wording or how it was said, the message was the same. I imagine her rising, dusting off her skirt, and returning to her house and children, holding her chin a little higher after an answer like that.

Within a week’s time, a neighbor—who has always been described by my family when they tell the story as “a good man”—came knocking on their door.

“Mrs. Fern, can we make a deal?” he asked. “I need some more land to work, if possible.”

Fern knew, then, that they would be alright.

For the most part, their family and community stepped in to help after Curt’s death. With the new neighbor working their land now, they were able to get along. They grew a garden and kept chickens and milk cows and hogs for meat. They took cream and eggs to trade at the local grocery store for items like sugar and coffee.

When Pa was around ten or eleven, Fern would send him—alone—to the gristmill five miles away with a load of corn to be ground. He remembered being scared to death every time he climbed onto the mule or horse but obeying his mother anyway. They had to have the cornmeal to keep eating.

A relative, Uncle Alec, ran the gristmill, and every time Pa—the widow Fern's boy—showed up with a load of corn, Alec ground it free of charge.

Pa never forgot that.

He was a rambunctious, hardworking boy. The same attitude that led him to try to hit the sun with a rock stayed with him, and so did the trial-and-error learning style. Classrooms were not his preferred setting. He made it through the seventh grade in school, but when asked in his later years what he remembered learning, he snorted. *Hah.* School was the lesser of his priorities. He read books and memorized poetry; he learned practical things, trade skills, knowledge that would be necessary for him years later as a farmer, a soldier, a builder. In many ways, he was self-taught from seventh grade onward.

He remembered being given a title by some neighbors in the community:

I carried the water from the spring, and I'd come off of the hill with a couple of buckets in one hand, rattlin' and a bangin,' maybe singing something…they got to calling me 'that wild boy' coming off the hill. 'There comes that wild boy again.'

That "wild boy" would soon begin filling roles that Curt would have, had he lived. By the time Pa was fourteen, he could venture into the woods, chop down a "good-sized" hickory tree, cut it up with a crosscut saw, then split it and haul it back to the house for firewood, alone. In one day.

He became less afraid of the horses and mules, too, and began working the farm in his teens. He would joke in years to come that he was *an old, seasoned farmer* by the age of seventeen.

It was when he was a teenager that they lost Gwendolyn, too.

She, Ginny, and their mother had moved to Bowling Green so Gwendolyn could go to school to be a teacher. She was ambitious. My dad speculates that she pushed herself too hard. While going to school in Bowling Green, she fell ill with tuberculosis and died while Pa was still living and farming at the homeplace, where his aunt and uncle had come to stay while the girls were away in the city.

By 1938, a family of five had become a family of three, and Pa had to grow up faster than most boys.

And he did. They lived on at the homeplace, on the farm and in their house with thin walls that let in the daylight. Pa became a young man, a young farmer. Their community—Trammel, Kentucky—was a small one, quiet farmland broken up by woods. It didn't see much excitement, which was why stories of the plane crash of 1943 have circulated in my family since Pa happened by it that summer day.

Kenneth, July of 1943

By then, he was twenty-one, and he was riding on horseback either to or from Trammel. It was July, and Kentucky's tumultuous weather patterns had done their worst. American Airlines flight 63 from Louisville to Nashville got caught in violent downdrafts from a storm that those who were alive at the time still remember. The aircraft was a Douglas DC-3, the civilian model of a C-47 which operated as a transport plane during World War II. It struck treetops before skidding to a stop in the adjacent field, landing upright. Those in the area recalled that they heard the plane coming in over the sounds of the storm.

My dad described the crash the way he'd heard it from his own father and others in the community:

> Dad: The pilot got too low, over here, and actually got so low he…tipped treetops in the fence row over there…they said they did a good job of putting the plane down, but it slid a long ways across the field…what was so crazy about it was when airplanes left the airports back then, they locked the doors on the outside…in fact that was the airplane crash that got the law and the regulations changed…probably just about everybody could have gotten out, most of 'em were smothered to death in a big pile by the door of the plane…but, Dad said the pilots were still in their seats and burned…one of 'em had his hand up, Dad said.

Eighteen out of twenty-two lives were claimed in the crash. Pa had no idea anything had happened until after the storm, when he saw the tail of the plane sticking up over the hilltop and noticed the gathering crowd as he rode past.

Pa was one of the Trammel community members who was hired on by authorities to help at the crash site. A photographer had come to document the accident, and Pa was tasked with helping him carry his equipment.

He remembered following the photographer up to the fence line where the plane had come through. The photographer wanted a more aerial view of the crash site, of the wreckage and the claw marks of torn earth where the plane had skidded. He started climbing one of the trees to find a good vantage point.

Pa watched while the photographer stretched toward a limb on which some fabric had snagged. Pulling the fabric free, he pitched it down to Pa.

"Here, here's a souvenir for you," the photographer called down.

It was an American Airlines banner which had flown from the outside of the plane, and it was torn nearly in half.

Aside from Pa's halved banner, someone found the plane's nosewheel in the forest on the other side of the field, took it home, and built a wheelbarrow around it. Pa's aunt ended up with silverware found in the wreckage, from meals eaten during the flight. The memory of the plane crash faded over time, except when someone's eye caught a piece of silverware, an old wheelbarrow tucked away in a shed, or a scrap of torn fabric that had once flown off the plane's exterior.

Airplane crash at Trammel, KY, from the Library Special Collections at WKU

The summer of storms and crashing planes passed, and 1943 turned into 1944. Pa continued farming, and World War II kept raging overseas. America had joined the fight three years prior, and up until 1944, Pa managed to avoid the draft, possibly because he was the only male in his family.

By 1944, however, the draft caught up with him and several other young men in the community.

He and two friends, both named Harold (Harold O. and Harold M.) found themselves, among others, given the choice of which branch of the military they would prefer to serve in. All but one requested to be assigned to the Navy, and the one chose Army.

In an ironic turn of events, the one who chose Army was assigned to the Navy. All the others, Pa included, were assigned to the Army. The young man sent to the Navy said, after the war, the he was "the most lonesome man you've ever seen in your life."

It was the last year of the war, but no one knew that for sure at the time. All Pa knew was that he would be in basic training somewhere, and that after, he could end up in the Pacific. His mother and teenage sister would be waiting for him at home, sending letters, praying. Asking for prayer.

Before he left to board a train to Camp Atterbury in Louisville, where he and the other draftees from Allen County would be processed, he wandered out into the woods of his homeplace, pocketknife in hand. Finding a large beech tree—the kind with pale, smooth bark, good for carving—he set to work with the pocketknife, and carved:

Greater love hath no man than this, that

a man lay down his life for his friends. KWN 1944

The words, from the Gospel of John, were his way of saying goodbye—in case he didn't come home.

Before talking with my family, I thought I could remember a time that we went to Pa's first home and found the tree he had carved. It had fallen, but the section of trunk in which he'd carved the verse was lying face-up on the forest floor, and I could remember—faintly—Pa working his way through brush to the trunk, no longer the young man he was when he'd carved it.

But what I was remembering was a time that we watched a home video recorded long before I was born. Watching the footage had lodged the moment in my mind as if it

were my own memory, as photographs and stories sometimes do. I wonder how many other memories about my grandfather have been created in the same way.

I do know for certain, though, that after carving the words in the tree, Pa left with the other draftees on a cold day in December. They boarded a troop train to Louisville, Kentucky, after saying goodbye to those at home. Pa's first letter from Camp Atterbury came as a reply to one that he got from his mother and sister upon arrival. It was apparent that the adjustments of leaving home and the prospects of what could be ahead were already taking their toll. On December 7th—the third anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor—he wrote, in part:

> *Dear Mom and Jenney, I got your letters just a while ago…You don't know how glad I was to hear from you I got the biggest kick out of Jenneys letter that I have had sence I got here but I just couldn't keep from crying when I read yours mom, god bless my good mom and sister I know your both praying for me and there is nothing at this place that would tempt me to brake the trust you have in me I read my bible when I have time, and pray every night when I go to bed…I forgot to say I am shipping out in the morning I will explain about not being stationed here latter do not worry about me I may be stationed at a camp close to home one of the boys said he heard a sarg say that a shipment is going to Fort Knox so lets pray that I will be in that bunch…*
>
> *Goodbye,*
>
> *Love Ken*

Though he was hoping to be sent to Fort Knox for basic training—which would at least keep him in the same state as his family—his superiors had other plans in mind.

My grandfather's next letter came from Camp Fannin, Texas.

CHAPTER III: THE WAR YEARS

Camp Fannin

Texas is not what it's cracked up to be.

Camp Fannin, a U.S. Army Infantry Replacement Training Center from 1943-1946, was located about twelve miles outside of Tyler, Texas, or one hundred miles from Dallas. It served as training grounds for the Army and housed German POWs during the later years of the war. In both geographic location and general atmosphere, it was a far cry from Kentucky. In old age, Pa joked about how the Army had sent him to a "nice resort park" when the troop train arrived at Camp Fannin.

The move to Camp Fannin came very shortly after his letter from Camp Atterbury in Louisville, Kentucky. In his first letter from Texas, he wrote, in part:

Sun. morning, Dec. 10 1944

Dear mom and Jenny, I do hope you are bouth well, I am feeling very well… I am at Camp Fannin Texas, got here last night…it sure was some trip for a guy like me I enjoyed it in way, but there was a sad feeling to because I knew I wouldn't get to see you all for a long time, not untill my basic training is over and that is anywhere from 17 to 20 weeks I was hoping they would station me close home but they don't keep many boys at Atterbury now, and I guess Fort Knox is full to…Harold O. and Harold M. are still with me and I have gotten acquanted with some more boys from Ky and allen co…

...I don't guess I ever will get everything told, you know how I am when I start to write I can't think of anything, but I do enjoy a good long letter from home. So Jenny you send me all the news…I know that you are both praying for me all the time but pray for the other boys to…if I never get to see you all on this earth again we will all be together in heaven so lets pray and trust to that and be ready.

...they have all kinds of things to read at the px so you needent go to any trouble to send me pappers I havent had a chance to read the ones you sent me yet just write to me I had rather have a good letter from my good mom and sister than anything on earth well I will close for now just keep praying for me and if the lord wills we will see each other in a few weeks,

With love,

Ken

The first few letters were each sent no more than three days apart. When he had more time in the evenings after meals to sit down and write, his handwriting was neater, smaller. Other times, when he scribbled off letters in a hurry, it was larger and quicker—"With love, Ken," would take up half of the final page in a hurried scrawl. He wrote back and forth with Fern and Ginny about everyday news and tasks, telling his mother to run the farm is if he were no longer alive—since his coming home couldn't be guaranteed. He knew, after the hard years from his childhood, that she was capable of handling things.

In a letter to Fern from December 12th, Pa wrote to her about how he didn't want her skimping to save any money for him; he knew Fern wouldn't save or use money for

herself (*I know how you are mom you won't enjoy much of anything*) but he didn't want Ginny, on the other hand, to have to grow up too fast. *Jennie is to young to buckle right down to stern life, I dont want her to, I want her to enjoy herself while she can, so don't be saving for me.*

Pa was more of an introvert. I remember this about him, and my family can testify, that while my grandmother was a social butterfly, my grandfather liked to be home better than most things. Home was quiet and familiar. The adjustment to army life meant that he found solidarity in the people, however, despite his more introverted ways. He was encouraged to see a corporal pray silently before his meal. He enjoyed joking with and playing tricks on the Harolds. There was a Polish man who was known for bursting into song or playing the harmonica (*so we have a little music along, it helps out a lot*), and a former Virginia coal miner who once shined Pa's shoes for him. The camaraderie made a difference.

But Camp Fannin was still colder than expected, monotonous, lackluster. Pa wrote to Ginny: *there are no girls and I haven't seen a horse since home.*

One of the perks to Camp Fannin, at least, was its food. In a postscript from his December 12th letter, he scribbled, *we get good grub here and plenty of it a lot better than we got at atterbury*. The quality of the food was a common theme throughout Pa's war letters. A few short weeks later, he would write home with a story that has circulated through my family ever since, an example of his sense of humor—which, like many men, got him through the more mundane periods of his service:

> *One day we had started out on the field, and we meet a truck, they were leading a old mule behind, I'm sure we had that mule for dinner next day, for while I was*

eating I said, haw Tom, and that meat did a left face, right on my platter.

(February 11th, 1945)

Of the adjacent town of Tyler, Pa wrote, *it's not a very big city, about like Franklin* [Kentucky], *I guess.* When the Harolds sent for their wives to come visit and stay in Tyler for a while, Pa wrote that he would have done no such thing: *I wouldn't have a wife or anyone else that was anything to me around here it's no place for a woman, there's more soldiers in Tyler than anybody else*.

Tyler may not have been a place where he would have brought his mother and sister, but it was where Pa went to chapel services and where—on his breaks—he would go to buy a coke, or, on occasion, see a movie when he was on break. He wrote a post card home to Jenny about seeing the Elizabeth Taylor film, *National Velvet*:

feb 4 1945

Dear Jennie, I have just go back from the show it was realy good, The National Velvet was the name of it, a little girl named Velvet won the grand Champion race on her horse, boy it was some race, the horse was a soral with stocking legs, he was really pretty, I wish you could have seen it. well I'll have to close loads of love Ken

I remember watching *National Velvet* as a horse-crazy kid in the 2000s. Little did I know that my grandfather, who shared my love for horses at the time, had seen the film when it was released to theaters during World War II.

Pa's new daily routine included training, cleaning his M-1 rifle, and the 4 S's: *shave, shower, and shine* (the fourth S was left to the imagination in family stories). It wasn't so bad, he said, no harder than farm life. Each lifestyle had its own routine,

whether that was feeding animals and chopping wood, or doing drills and cleaning rifles. Farm life was preferable, though, over army life. So was the peace of farm life preferable over a country at war. When 1945 arrived, Pa wrote, *let us pray that it may be a better one than the one just past.*

While Ginny shared news from home, Pa wrote frequently about his training procedures. He wrote about taking mortar and shell classes, about firearms training, and about grenade-throwing practice: *first we had a little make believe action we took some dummy grenades and creept up a little hill, they had some cardboard Germans in foxholes down below…those foxholes had water half knee deep in them (but…the army don't march around mudpuddles…) we threw a grenade from the foxhole at a meshine gun nest, then on down to finish the first run, then we went a little farther on to where we threw the real thing, we lay flat on the ground with the target out in the front, (the had sawdust for us to lie on) six of us at a time would go out to throw*—and then it was back to chow, and cleaning rifles in the evening.

Despite being away from home, he stayed positive. His sense of humor—the one that told stories about mule meat turning left on his plate—helped with that. In the same letter that described the grenade training, he wrote about having to count cadence with the other soldiers. He told that at times they were commanded to count—*1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4*—in falsetto. *You can imagain how a bunch of old boys sound squealing along, I get so bad tickled sometimes I have to stop counting.* But they couldn't laugh. *When your at attention your not allowed to move a hair.*

December gave way to February, and then March. *We are having pretty weather down here most of the time, today is just like spring, if all the weather was like this the*

army wouldn't be half as bad. By March, there was talk of going home before shipping out after basic training—and eventually, he would get a short leave, maybe thirty days.

Pa didn't consider himself homesick, not like some of the men around him, at least. He kept his chin up.

But still, he wrote: *Theres not a boy in the army who wouldn't give the world to be back home.*

The Pacific

The years that I spent in my grandparents' old, stone house were filled with evidence of Pa's time in Japan, and for the most part, I had no idea.

Pa and Nana didn't have many toys on hand, but there were items that we played with as children—the Chinese checkerboard, for example, which rarely served as an actual checkerboard. It was most often my grandmother's lap desk, which she would use to balance her diary on as she recorded details throughout each day. Other times, the checkerboard served as play. An old Nesquik chocolate powder can full of marbles gave us a way to pass the time as we arranged them in patterns over the checkerboard's indentions. Glassy marbles and opaque marbles, their swirls of color catching the lamplight.

There was the stool that we would spin on, dizzying ourselves in the living room until we toppled off, laughing, over and over. There was the basket of seashells in the living room that we would pick through, lining them up along the edge of the coffee table or pressing them to our ears to hear the hollow echoes of a distant ocean. There were the chapter books on the staircase bookshelf, and the picture books stacked deep in a drawer in the living room.

But I remember a little bell that my grandmother would let us play with. She told us to ring it if we needed something while she was in another room. It was dark and smooth, with a high, clear ring that could be heard across the house when we shook it. It was a familiar sound in my childhood, and a signal that Nana was on her way.

The thing I didn't know about the bell was that it had originally belonged in a Buddhist temple in Japan, and that it came back with Pa, along with a couple of kimonos and some other odds and ends that were kept in a trunk upstairs. My grandfather's time overseas was more of a concept than a reality to me, then. He talked about home. He talked about Kentucky. The fact that he'd tasted salt wind off the Pacific and walked the foothills of Mount Fuji was foreign to me, in every sense of the word.

Ginny Newman, wearing one of the kimonos
her brother brought back from Japan

The Japan he would have known was far different than the one I grew up learning about, too. Japan was a country across the world with cherry trees and bamboo forests,

temples and cities named Tokyo and Osaka. It was a small, green crescent on the maps in my geography classes and in my schoolbooks. Nonthreatening.

For people of my grandfather's time, the name "Japan" came with entirely different memories and associations, Pearl Harbor among them. The unfortunate truth of the 1940s was that Japan was an Axis power, one of the places where the boys and men who were drafted off American soil ended up.

Pa was fortunate enough to be sent near the war's end, serving primarily with occupation troops. The Japan that he encountered was settling into its new post-war reality after Hiroshima, after Nagasaki, after occupation. What was it like for him, to step off the troop ship onto land that was once only a green crescent on a map? To the place from which the bombers that attacked Pearl Harbor had originated?

Though my view of the situation is from an American lens—from the shoes of my grandfather—I wonder, too, what it was like for the Japanese to watch their resource-starved country start to crawl with Allied troops. My grandfather wrote about how he was surprised that some of the Japanese people he interacted with seemed happy to see the soldiers. I wonder, though, if some also kept their distance.

Everyone was tense, and they had a right to be, on both sides. My grandfather was never involved in combat—he said that he never shot at anyone, and if anyone ever shot at him, he didn't know it. He trained with the 11th Airborne for a while before serving with an infantry unit. He was close enough to combat to hear the gunfire, to see and smell the results of it. He saw the aftermath of the Battle of Manila, destruction comparable to what happened in Berlin and Warsaw, and travelled some of the road where the Bataan Death March had taken place in 1942. He missed receiving his Combat Infantryman

Badge by about a week, leaving the infantry unit after eighty or so days out of the required ninety to be given the badge.

In Japan, he did guard duty, drills, and whatever other tasks came up. Many of his letters from Japan were less-than-enthused. With the war over, the troops in Japan were simply occupying surrendered territory. Not that it wasn't still dangerous, in some ways, but, as Pa put it, *[We're] just killing time till we can come home, and for the good we're doing we might as well be at home now.*

Home, at the time, was still several months away.

*

Over the years, I started hearing more stories—more details—about Pa's time in the service.

My dad likes to tell about how the troop train that took Pa west to San Francisco was so long that Pa could look around one sweeping curve and see the "tail end" of the train around the other curve as they snaked through the Rocky Mountains. After a short time in San Francisco, he and five thousand other men sailed out on the U.S.S. General Mann under the Golden Gate Bridge. It took nineteen days to cross the Pacific.

One day on ship, as he was sweeping on deck, the broom fell out of his hands, slipped between the railing, and plummeted into the churning ocean below.

"He had the awfullest feeling come over him for just a second," my dad told. "If you went overboard in a convoy like that, they didn't—nobody stopped for you. It was just—it was too bad…they couldn't—the ship couldn't break speed with the convoy to pick somebody up…didn't have good brakes," he joked.

I imagine Pa made sure to keep his bearings after he watched the broom clatter through the railing. Maybe he thought about the dirt at home, right in front of the porch stoop, or the grass in the field where he kept Bess and Mag, the horses—earth that supported his weight and didn't rock like the water did.

Unlike some, Pa didn't get seasick. *I'm an ole sea dog*. The troop ship stopped first in the Philippines, in Luzon. While they were there, Japan's surrender was announced on August 15th, though it wouldn't be officially signed until September. On August 16th, Pa wrote to Fern and Ginny: *I guess you've all been celebrating over the Japs surrendering. We have to. I do hope its all true, and we can have peace again. Theyre still fighting but maybe they'll quit without too much more trouble.*

In Luzon, Pa realized that he wouldn't be home by winter as they'd hoped. Despite the setback, he wrote about other things—about *listening to the fellow over in the next tent playing the violen*, adding, *we boys have a pretty good time here together in spite of army life.* The man who was playing violin may have been a friend that kept in touch with Pa after the war. Pa told about how the man had once made a fiddle out of some scrap aluminum while overseas. He was know for playing the tune "Raggedy Anne."

Pa got separated from the Harolds after shipping out, but despite sixteen million Americans serving in both Europe and the Pacific, the world kept proving itself small. *Sargt Smith is one of the squad leaders in our platoon, but we all call him awol, he was nicknamed that back in the states and they still call him that, I wonder what one of the Sargts back in Fannin would have done if somebody had called them by their nickname,*

they would have put the whole Co. on detail for a week. Smith is a good ole Ky boy thou and you can't beat a fellow from Ky I don't care where you look.

On Friday morning, September 7th, they left Manila Harbor for Japan, *sailing along just beautifully*. Pa thought he saw a familiar face among some men playing poker on the hood of a jeep on deck, but it wasn't until later at chow that he was able to flag the man down. It was Earl Cline, a friend who would eventually run Gold City Grocery across the road from the Gold City Feed Mill, which Pa would eventually own. At that time, the two men were just trying to figure out how to get back to their community. The fact that they would one day be central figures in its day-to-day business was far from their minds.

He wrote to Fern, *He didn't know I was even in the army, he ask me how they ever happened to take me off the farm and away from you I told him they got me just like they got the rest of them.*

The troops arrived to a surrendered—and calmer—Japan. As the convoy of ships approached on their path from Luzon, Pa wrote home saying, *no trouble is expected*. Once they'd settled, the daily routine became predictable, monotonous. For Pa and many of the men around him, the constant question in their minds was: when can I go home?

While in Japan, with the war simmering down worldwide, many of his letters home contained back and forth planning between Pa and Fern to try to get him home as soon as possible—talk of affidavits, points, conversations with superiors, letters to the War Department. The problem was, millions of other families were trying the same thing. *I hope we're lucky enough to get me home right away*, he wrote, *but it may not be easy. I*

don't want to be a pesimist but knowing this army like I do I don't have very great hopes of getting out for a while.

Kenneth—back row, second from left—in Japan, 1946

They tried to make some memories while they were there, if nothing else came of it. Some of these became stories that I heard growing up, stories I would ask him to tell. There was a story about how one of the sergeants acquired a pet monkey that would pilfer through the men's belongings in the barracks until one day, when they'd had enough. My dad recalled: "One of the guys picked up some kind of makeshift club, knocked the monkey in the head and pitched him out the window—and that was the end of the monkey."

There was also the time they went to a rodeo—or an attempt at a rodeo. The steers that the American soldiers attempted to ride were old and worn out, plodding into the

corral with little verve despite their riders doing their best to spur them forward. It seemed that watching the riders struggle to liven their animals was the most entertaining part of the "rodeo" experience.

One of the stories I find most interesting, however, was the time my grandfather attempted to climb Mount Fuji.

*

My sense of determination comes, I think, from Pa.

It shows up when I spot a potential challenge and call it an opportunity to prove myself. Once, I was set on reaching the lowest limb of a small tree in our yard, just to say I could, though it loomed high above my head. My dad quietly watched the ensuing struggle as I took running leaps, scratching knuckles and fingertips against the rough bark, trying not to body slam the trunk.

On what must have been my eighth try, I panted, "Is this a Newman thing?"

Dad nodded slowly.

A few more tries and I reached the limb, gripping it tight and shaking from the effort. I swung a few feet above the ground until I was satisfied, then dropped back to earth.

Perhaps it was sheer boredom that drove my grandfather and some of his acquaintances to embark on such a daring quest, or perhaps it was the "Newman thing"; either way, they decided to climb Mount Fuji. As my father retold it: "They tried—they attempted, he and two or three guys, they thought one day they'd take off and climb Mount Fujiyama. And uh, they made it over the first set of foothills, then over the second set of foothills and it got on up in the day and then they made it over the third set of

foothills and the mountain kept being about as far away lookin' as it ever was, and they finally gave up on it and went back to the barracks."

It was many years later when I would realize that one of the symbolic images of Japan that I learned in my childhood—the rising, snowcapped peak, framed by cherry blossoms—had once bested my grandfather. Just as he had tried to throw a rock at the sun, "that wild boy" from Kentucky decided to take on a Japanese mountain, and at least he could say that he tried.

*

The summer slipped away, and they celebrated Thanksgiving in Japan with a day off. Pa sent home the menu from chow, a faded, typewritten document listing roast turkey, giblet gravy, peas, blackberry sauce, and apple pie, among other Thanksgiving favorites. December soon followed, and with it, a couple of sentences in one of Pa's letters that would eventually become a story.

Pa wrote in one of his letters to Fern and Ginny, *I wrote you last night…and sent a letter I got from Irene…she sent me a xmas card and letter thanking me for the present I sent them. you needn't ever tell anybody that I sent them anything, I don't like to do a thing like that and then tell everybody about it*.

The "present," as it turned out, was monetary. I knew the gist of the story growing up: while in Japan, Pa came across some money that he didn't feel right about keeping for himself, whatever the reason. He had heard about a widow in his community back home, though, who was in need of financial help. He sent the money to her, a significant sum for 1945. However much it was, it helped her greatly.

This story became so representative of my grandfather's character that I wanted to know more about it. The acts of generosity he was known for in later life undoubtedly came from observing as the community supported his own family in his childhood. Not all, but many, were of the same mind that helping widows and their children was the right thing—the obvious thing—to do. Like Uncle Alec, never charging a fee whenever Fern's boy showed up at the gristmill with a sack of corn to be ground. They needed the help. It was just the thing to do. And Pa didn't forget it.

I don't know every detail of all that trasnpired during Pa's time in Japan. I do know that the memories surrounding how he came across the money in the story are hazy, and that he didn't feel like it was right to keep the money for himself. I asked my dad and my aunt about this, and they both contributed what they could remember:

> Aunt Gwen: It was something like where they'd gone in on a bunch of Japanese guys gambling, wasn't it? And they scooped up their money, was that the way it was?
>
> Dad: Don't remember anything about that.
>
> Aunt Gwen: Well anyway it was something I think along that order, and Pa realized he could not keep the money or send it to his own family, that just would not be right, it was—I don't know if it was just like a—they thought they'd do a raid or what exactly what, I don't remember that detail that well. Or do you remember it as something else?
>
> Dad: I remember [Pa] talking about them going into old Jap warehouses, military warehouses and stuff, and they would find—he said they'd pilfer through things and actually sell stuff cheap back to some of the Japanese.

Aunt Gwen: Oh I don't remember that at all. But however—anyway they came upon this money, somehow, some way. And Pa knew he couldn't have any—it couldn't be any advantage to him personally, but he did know this family back in the states that desperately needed it and he sent them a good little chunk. Wasn't it a couple hundred bucks, something like that?

Dad: It was a hundred at least. Which was a whole lotta money.

Aunt Gwen: And oh, they were just so grateful

Dad: What had happened was the—Dad found out, I guess through Granny or Aunt Ginny or letters or whatever that—that the son in this family had been killed in action somewhere.

Aunt Gwen: But he sent them the money and that really helped them out.

My own conscience has led me to feel, before, as Pa may have felt when he found himself in possession of a sum of money from occupied Japan. For me, an action or a word or a choice doesn't sit right if the morality behind it is grey. In Pa's case, keeping and using the money didn't sit right, as he would tell my dad years later. But it was in his possession, regardless. When he found out about the family in need, he knew exactly where the money would go.

In his letters, it was apparent that Pa tried to keep the situation quiet. He received a thank-you letter from the woman he had sent the money to, and he shared that with Fern and Ginny. Otherwise, he told them he didn't want word to get out about it. He knew people would talk, one way or the other. *Some will call me a fool and some a good fellow* [for sending the money], he wrote. *Doesn't matter…I thought they needed it and I wanted them to have it.*

We still have the letter that Pa received from Irene, one of the women in the family to whom he gave the money. My aunt showed it to me as we were sifting through letters from Pa and other members of the community together. The two of us leaned over her kitchen table as we scanned the cursive handwriting, the old notebook paper weighted down at the edges by salt and pepper shakers. Irene wrote, in part:

Bowling Green, Ky

Dec. 2nd, 1945

Dearest Kenneth,

> Well dear boy I just don't know how to begin to express our appreciation for the nice present recd. from you. Kenneth we was never more surprised and happier I said I always knew you was a wonderful boy and it was so sweet and thoughtful of you to think of us. I'm sure you do know how to sympathize with us and I don't know how to thank you enough for what you have done…Kenneth I'll be so happy and am praying for the time when all you boys will be back with us of course the sad part of it is part of them won't ever be back and that hurts us so much we can't get over it. But we try to feel that God knows best and live so that we can go see him some day…I feel that we owe you so much and I want you to know that we thank you from the bottom of our hearts and if ever we can be of any help to you in any way be sure to let us know.

Pa's community had watched out for him when his family needed help. And, from the stories I've been told—and the time I knew him—he was always on the lookout for ways to give back.

*

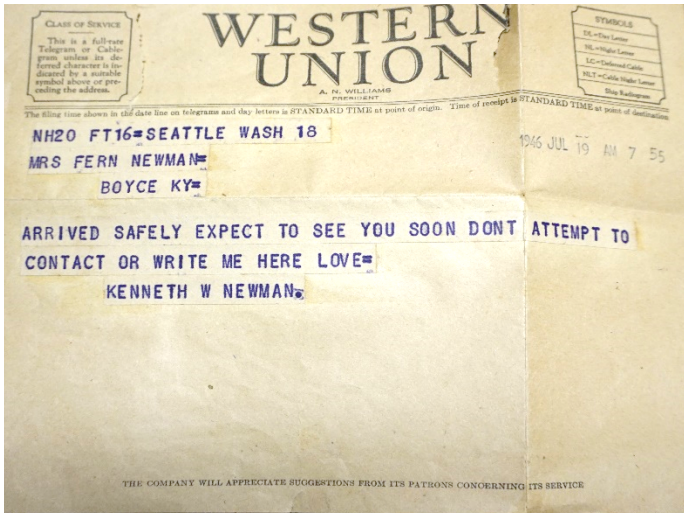
Weeks passed with Pa still overseas. In Kentucky, Fern and Ginny were selling livestock and farm equipment, along with their home. They were considering moving to a new place they'd bought from a neighbor. While I don't know the details of why the move was necessary, I know it took up a lot of ink and paper in their letters back and forth. Pa gave input on what he could from overseas, wishing he could be there in person. In a letter written March 21st, 1946—a day he described as warm enough for short sleeves and *clear as a whistle*, he wrote, *I'd give my eye teeth to be at home today and at Beech Grove* [church] *tonight…if I could just walk in at Beech Grove tonight about the time the singing starts I wouldn't trade places with a king.*

In May, Fern sent a request to the War Department, an attempt at getting her son home early. The reply she received read:

> YOUR COMMUNICATION DATED 1 MAY 1946 HAS BEEN RECEIVED REGARDING THE DISCHARGE OF THE FOLLOWING NAMED ENLISTED MAN: Newman, Kenneth W. 35 820 505 DUE TO LARGE VOLUME OF WORK AND THE SHORTAGE OF PERSONELL THERE MAY BE SOME DELAY IN GIVING YOU A FULL REPLY.

Despite all their efforts, it would be July before Pa came home.

Three summers after the plane crashed in Trammel, and almost a year and a half after being drafted, Pa sent a telegram from Seattle, Washington to let his family know he had collected enough points to be discharged. He was—finally—coming home.



WESTERN UNION

A. N. WILLIAMS
PRESIDENT

CLASS OF SERVICE

This is a full-rate Telegram or Cable-gram unless its deferred character is indicated by a suitable symbol above or preceding the address.

SYMBOLS

DL = Day Letter
NL = Night Letter
LC = Deferred Cable
NLT = Cable Night Letter
Ship Radiogram

The filing time shown in the date line on telegrams and day letters is STANDARD TIME at point of origin. Time of receipt is STANDARD TIME at point of destination

NH20 FT16=SEATTLE WASH 18

1946 JUL 19 AM 7 55

MRS FERN NEWMAN=
BOYCE KY=

ARRIVED SAFELY EXPECT TO SEE YOU SOON DONT ATTEMPT TO
CONTACT OR WRITE ME HERE LOVE=
KENNETH W NEWMAN.

THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING ITS SERVICE

Telegram from Kenneth on his way home, 1946

While Fern was standing at her mailbox, having received the news, she shared it with a nextdoor neighbor.

"Well-if-I-was-you-I'd-be-glad-of-it," the woman snapped, stringing her words together in a rush.

As if Fern would be anything but glad.

When Pa heard about the exchange, he tucked away the line for use in years to come, one of the many colloquialisms he was known for. He stored them like one remembers song lyrics or important dates in history and he passed them down to us, the same as material objects are handed down. That line in particular would prove useful for moments of success, both large and small. "Well-if-I-was-you-I'd-be-glad-of-it," he'd say when one of us had exciting news to share, a gleam in his eye. I hear my dad use the same phrase, often.

*

When Pa returned to the states, a troop train carried him across the north, stopping in Chicago, where they had to wait for the train that would take them south. He and a friend hired a taxi to occupy themselves during the wait. “Said this taxicab driver was a good guy and just… gave ’em more or less a tour of the city, just drove ’em all over the place, showed ’em Chicago,” Dad recalled. “Made it to the next train station, got on, and headed home.”

On the day that he was supposed to arrive home, Fern had heard other news. Just like the story about how God spoke to her when she prayed to seek help after her husband’s death, I heard, growing up, the story of how she knew when Pa would come home—though it was different than the day he had written her.

“Well that was another interesting story,” my aunt said, when I asked her for details about Pa’s return from the war. We were sitting in her living room with cups of coffee, a basket of old, faded letters between us. She turned to my dad.

Aunt Gwen: Was that when he came home at the end of the war that the Lord let Granny know it was going to be a day or two later than he’d said?

Dad: Coming into Bowling Green.

Aunt Gwen: —and Aunt May and Uncle Ted, they went on to the station to get him and she told ’em, said, he’s not going to be there, it’s going to be such-and-such a day ’cause the Lord had already instructed her about it, and sure enough, he was—he was on the day that the Lord told ’em, imagine that.

I asked her how Fern knew, exactly. “She was looking in the book of Job, the best I remember it,” my aunt said. “And there was…I don’t know, you know how the Bible

says ‘the third day of the fourth month’ or something like that, and, evidently the Lord touched her heart when she got to that verse—and she knew that’s when it would be.”

Pa’s aunt and uncle waited for him at the train station, but he didn’t arrive the day he was supposed to. His train rolled into Bowling Green a couple of days later, when Fern told them he would get home.

We always considered him one of the fortunate ones—one of the boys who made it home to friends and family. The community welcomed him back, along with the Harolds—who each made it home, too, despite their involvement in combat.

Pa was home, back to Fern and Jenny, back to the country and state where he was rooted. For the rest of his life he would work on sinking those roots deeper, staying in his beloved Kentucky, working in the community he’d left for long enough.

“Yup, he was ready to be home for good for a while,” Dad said. Pa didn’t travel much after that. “[We] never could get him to go camping,” Dad added. “He had had all the camping he wanted in 1944, 5, and 6.”

And maybe that was why I didn’t hear much about Japan when I was little. Those were stories that came up when they were prompted. The grandfather I knew was strong and sturdy and planted, like an oak tree, the man who helped build the home I grew up in, and who took me for walks around his farm where the corn grew above our heads one season, where the winter wheat rippled under the cold force of wind the next. The grandfather I knew often sat in a leather armchair in the living room with a Bible open on his lap. He wore flannel shirts and quoted poems by Whittier and Longfellow and Poe and others, and he had a deep laugh that filled the room. He was a Kentuckian, through and through.

Once, he was a younger man and a soldier, but with the same deep laugh and the same devotion to his roots, and his family was glad he came home—glad of it.

Kenneth Newman, PFC US Army, World War II

CHAPTER IV: THE BUILDER

In a letter dated December 29th, 1945, Pa wrote:

We got to talking about what we aimed to do when we got home the other day. I said I aimed to stay single for a long time yet. Sgt. Dilts offered to bet me I'd be married in less than a year, I ax him just how much money he wanted to put up on that. he never did say.

Sgt. Dilts would have lost his bet, but not by a wide margin. My grandfather arrived home from the war in July of 1946, and it was at a Halloween party in 1947 when he met my grandmother.

Her name was Katie Sue Forgy, and she was dressed as a cat. Family tradition has it that she had also put fingernail polish on her knees, perhaps in place of rouge—a trend that started in the early to mid-1900s when shorter skirts became more acceptable.

"She was just seventeen," my aunt said. "Aunt Ginny said [Pa] thought she was the prettiest little black-eyed thing he had ever seen, so shortly thereafter they started going out."

Katie Sue—who I would one day know as Nana—was almost twenty when they married in August of 1950. According to the marriage announcement in the local newspaper, she was wearing "a teal blue lace dress with white accessories and a corsage of white orchids."

Katie Sue Forgy and Kenneth Newman

In 1951, Pa decided to buy the Gold City Feed Mill and borrowed some money to make it happen, paying it back over time as the mill ran. They moved into a two-story white farmhouse that faced Gold City Grocery, across the road from the mill. By then, the store was owned by Earl Cline—the man Pa saw playing poker on the hood of a jeep on the troop ship to Japan, and later sat with at chow.

Fern, Pa's mother, lived in a house behind the mill until she moved to a Methodist nursing home in 1959. "I remember she closed off the rest of the house, and just lived in the kitchen," my aunt said. "She had her a cot on one wall and of course the table kind of out in the middle, and that's all she needed, just a place to eat and sleep. I think there was maybe a rocking chair or two in there."

Gold City was a small community comprised of a country store, a feed mill, and a scattering of farmhouses. Much of it was farmland. My dad describes those years—Gold City in the 1950s and 60s—as a quieter, simpler time. Everyone knew everyone. Most people worked within the community and never went far. After work was done for the day, neighbors would visit in the evenings, shelling peas or playing Rook on their front porches on milder nights.

The mill was a necessary feature of the farming community, as almost everyone needed their feed ground. Running a feed mill could also be dangerous work. Fires were always a threat because machinery liked to overheat.

Pa was a strong man. My Dad told me once that Pa, in his younger days, took part in a weightlifting contest with some other farmers. He lifted three-hundred pounds: a one-hundred-pound feed sack in each hand, and another in his teeth.

People who knew him described him as the hardest-working man they ever knew, who wouldn't ask anyone to do something he wasn't willing to do himself. That included keeping the mill from burning down, as best he could.

When Pa owned it, the mill ran on a Moline gasoline motor. It did its job, for the most part, but there was a day that the motor started malfunctioning. "He knew the engine would just burn up and probably catch fire, and the only way—he hit the kill switch on it, and it just—it just, didn't even work. Just—and the only thing he could do was run his arm behind the spark plug wires and yank 'em off," my dad said. Pa told that as he yanked the wires loose, sparks were jumping six inches.

The incident with the motor was only a precursor of the worse thing ahead. On a November day in 1953, Pa was working at the mill when he watched an ember fly from

somewhere in the motor area and fall to the floor. Pa lunged, stomping the ember to put it out, but it had already caught the dust on fire. Sparks burst from under his boot, spreading rapidly.

"They had to all get out. They had a 55-gallon drum of gasoline they were afraid would blow up," Dad said. One of the mill workers had to leave behind his new World War II leather bomber coat, which went up in flames with everything else.

"Mama said Aunt Ginny came by, from work, and I think was pretty tore up, of course," my aunt said. Not only could Pa and the other men have been injured, but losing the mill meant losing everyone's source for getting their feed ground—and for Pa, his source of income.

Just as it took the community to keep the mill in business, it took the community to rebuild it. "There was a whole lot of people donated trees and lumber…to help build that mill back so they could get feed ground again," Dad said. As they were rebuilding, Pa inquired in Franklin, Kentucky about running electricity to Gold City so that the new mill could be run with electric motors. "They had to run a three-phase line out of Franklin to Gold City," Dad said. "Yeah, coming across farms and stuff, used a lot of mules and horses pulling the big wooden rolls of wire…but [Pa] was instrumental in getting a three-phase line to Gold City."

Under Pa's direction, they built the mill back up. He also built a new storage shed behind it and hammered all the heavy oak flooring down with a red-handled Plumb hammer, leaving his hands numb for days.

My Aunt Gwen was born in May of 1954, after the fire in November. In 1958, my grandmother became pregnant again, this time with twins. She didn't know she was

having twins until the moment she had them. One they named Stephen—my father. He would have many nicknames, one of them "Chief." The other baby boy was named Kerry, and he died shortly after birth.

Kenneth with young Gwen, mid-1950s

The little boy that lived spent his first weeks at the Vanderbilt Hospital before he was strong enough to come home. It was around this same time, as Pa was waiting to be able to bring his son home, that he heard about a woman in the Gold City community who had lost her husband. Like Pa's own mother, she became a widow with children.

After that, whenever she came to have feed ground at the mill, Pa didn't charge her a dime. Loss was a thing he was acquainted with—all too well, all too recently—and he remembered what his Uncle Alec had done for his own family a long time ago.

Stephen came home and grew into a healthy, mischievous boy, much like Pa had been. A year after he was born, in 1959, Pa sold the mill. After almost ten years of running it, the dust was "beginning to catch up with him" and by now he had a wife and

two children to care for. In the years to come, he would farm, work for the Postal Service, and build barns and toolsheds. When I drive with my dad through Simpson and Allen County, it seems that he can point out every other barn and say, “Dad built that one.”

My aunt once told me, “Daddy—whatever he did, he meant to do it right. And I mean it would stay forever.”

*

My grandfather may have been a World War II veteran who could lift a hundred-pound feed sack in his teeth and chop up a tree in one day by the age of fourteen, but he was also gentle.

One night when my dad was three or four years old, he remembered wanting to go out to the barn with Pa to feed the animals. Though it was a cold night, Pa relented. They walked out to the barn and climbed into the loft together, where Pa began breaking hay bales open, tossing them down to the livestock below. My dad found a comfortable pile of the dry, sweet-smelling hay and, weary, fell asleep.

He didn’t wake up until he was being carried back to the house over Pa’s shoulder. I imagine Pa seeing his little boy curled up asleep and lifting him into his arms. “Time to go in, Chief,” he might have whispered, carrying him down from the loft.

Dad remembered raising his head, looking back as Pa walked them home. It was a blueish, winter horizon past the barn and barn lot. Behind the tree line, a golden harvest moon was rising.

*

Years passed, and my aunt and my dad grew up. My aunt married first, and soon Pa and Nana became grandparents to a little girl named Casey—my older cousin. She remembers, even so many years later, that Pa taught her to tell time.

Nana liked to help us get ahead on our education, aiding Casey in reading and writing before she even started school. Pa's teaching methods were of a more practical nature. He asked Casey, one day, if she would like to learn to tell time, and she nodded eagerly.

She remembers sitting in his lap, the two of them tucked in the corner by his bookshelf, and he held a clock in front of her, one that allowed him to move the hands manually from a mechanism in the back. He smelled like sawdust, the outdoors, and a hint of Old Spice. Slowly, patiently, he wound forward through the hours, around and around, letting her associate the position of the hands with the time of day: *Now that's four o'clock…now five o'clock*…he might have said.

She felt safe, and warm, and secure, in that way that grandfathers can provide, that way that our grandfather provided. Years later, she had a dream about our family in the kitchen together and there was food, and warm sunlight, and a little singing, and it was the same feeling as when she was secure in Pa's arms as a little girl, watching the hour hand rove around the clockface.

As grandparents, Pa and Nana expressed their love in different ways. Pa was the advocate, keeping his grandchildren's secrets and letting them cry into his flannel shirts whenever comfort was needed. Nana sought growth, personal development; she made sure her grandchildren could recite the books of the Bible in order and were well fed, and she let us help her in the work of keeping her yard clean and her summer flowers healthy.

By the time grandchildren came along, Pa and Nana lived just down the road from Gold City Grocery in a stone house, where I spent much of my childhood. It was family-built, with an arched front porch facing the road and a back porch where we often sat outside in white plastic chairs on warm nights. The back porch faced the barns, a sprawling pecan tree, and acres of field where corn and soybeans and wheat grew in rotation.

I remember walking between wooden buckets of bright pink petunias with Nana, pinching off the buds that were wilted. She told me it would make room for new ones to grow. I'd help her drag the garden hose around to fill the stone bird bath outside her kitchen window and water her flower beds, where lilies and lilacs grew, and little magenta flowers that smelled, to me, like cinnamon.

While Nana involved us in the yardwork, Pa built things. For Casey, he built a red playhouse in the backyard between the garage and his toolshed. It sat just in front of a row of plum trees that hummed with the activity of iridescent June bugs in the summer. He also built a red swing set with blue rubber seats that filled with water after showers of rain. It seemed that Pa never stopped building things, creating structures for us to play in, to make memories in.

As for my father, Stephen, he was well on his way to becoming a confirmed bachelor when he met my mother, a teacher from Bowling Green who wanted to live in the country, despite having grown up in the city. Crossing creek beds in "Old Gray"—Dad's 1980s Ford Ranger—to visit family with him brought slight trepidation, but eventually, she would be living on land so rural that it would become the norm.

They decided to build their own home. First, they found land, then logs, deciding to restore an old log house that was built in the 1830s. Parts of the house had been burned in kitchen fires over the years. It was dusty, filled with junk and a collapsed chimney, and occupied by a turkey vulture nest and brown recluse spiders.

They got to work.

My dad and grandfather, along with a few other men from the community and relatives who came to help as needed, began the process of building a home in the heat of a Kentucky summer in 1995. Their goal was to be in it by Christmas.

As they deconstructed and cleaned the original log house, preparing it to be reconstructed in a more modern style for our future home, they found a treasure trove of history in its walls and under its floorboards: old bottles, a collection of Native American beads, and an old newspaper pasted to one of the logs which featured a headline about a memorial celebration of Abraham Lincoln's birthday, a few years after his assassination.

Over the months, they cleaned out the mess inside the house and took off the siding and tin roof. Pa built a boom to remove the logs. He and Dad cut down trees so electric lines could come through on the new property where the house would go up. They dug and poured the footers for the foundation and built forms for the basement walls.

The first log went up on the new foundation two years after they started.

In November of 1997, I was born, becoming Pa and Nana's second grandchild. By the time I was able to toddle around on my own, enough of the house was built that Pa could take me into my future bedroom and let me stand in the empty window frame, looking out, one arm protectively around me.

Kenneth and young Alicyn, 1998

Another three years, and my brother came along. By then, it was 2001.

Almost six Christmases after that 1995 Christmas when Dad predicted they'd be done building, we moved into the log house, and my parents hosted a family dinner to celebrate.

That still wouldn't be the end of Pa building things, however. A few years down the road, my brother and I started asking for a treehouse. Pa and dad built us a playhouse on stilts instead, with a shake roof and a small back porch that overlooked the woods. We painted "Fort Newman" on the doorframe in red block letters. Pa constructed a swing set in our yard just outside the kitchen window, where Mom could look out and watch us play. Though I struggle to remember those earlier days with Pa, I'm sure that even as he worked, he was telling me stories.

Kenneth Newman, putting up fencing—a lifetime farmer and builder

Maybe a story about growing up—the time that some loose change in his lunch pail spooked the horse he was riding, and it took off at a gallop down the road, catching him by surprise. Or maybe a story from Japan, about the monkey in their barracks or a lackluster rodeo, or the time he tried to climb Mount Fuji. He probably told me about the horses he had growing up, Bess and Mag and Prince, because I loved horses too.

His was a quieter presence. While Nana was a people person, Pa generally liked going home after a gathering over going to one, if it didn't involve immediate family. I remember more of Nana's bustling around their house than I do of Pa's. He could often be found sitting under lamplight, reading. While Nana would be chattering about the weather or something she had heard on the radio, Pa would be walking steadily alongside us, watching the corn rattle in the breeze on an autumn day. When we left at night after

visiting, he always waited on the back porch, watching until we drove out of sight. Backlit by the porch light, he would keep one hand raised in goodbye.

I remember things like the sound of his hammer as our playhouse took shape, and a goodbye wave in the dark. The specific moments, the conversations we had—they've faded over time. But I remember the stories.

CHAPTER V: STORYTELLERS

When I began this project in 2019, I began it under the impression that I would be discovering new information about moments I wasn't present for in my childhood. I knew we had hours of video footage of Pa telling his stories and interacting with the family, and I knew that much of my material from this project would come from them. I remembered that they had been filmed, that Pa sat in his leather chair and that it was September, that the corn was tall and dry in the fields. But all I remember of that time was being sent outside to play in Pa and Nana's backyard with my brother, while the adults stayed in.

Part of my research for this project was watching all those videos, sifting through the stories and allowing them to jog what memories I had. There were five miniature discs in all, recorded on Mom's early-2000s video camera.

On the day that I watched them, I slipped the first disc carefully into my DVD player, as if I were handling one of the war letters. Outside, gingko leaves shuddered under an October wind. I settled onto the couch, pen and notebook in hand, as the disc loaded.

There was the familiar leather chair with the crack across the headrest, through which yellow stuffing showed; there was the lamp with an off-white shade that cast a harsh, orange glow; there was the wood-paneled wall, and the window looking out over the backyard where I assumed my brother and I would have been playing, cracking open hickory nuts between bricks or picking through the collection of seashells along the edge of the porch.

And there was Pa in the leather chair, looking back at me. I hadn't heard his voice in over ten years.

*

"We've got all the family here together. Nana's over there, looking at some book…Pa is over in the corner," Dad narrated from behind the camera, panning it around the living room to take in our family. My aunt and uncle were there, and Casey, and Mom on the couch, and Nana in the corner by Pa, with a book in her lap.

And then, me.

I was sitting on the couch next to Mom, nine years old, looking straight into the camera. My little brother was in the middle of the living room floor, playing with a child-size baseball bat.

To this day, I don't remember being there for any of it. But we have it recorded—how I asked Pa for stories from Japan, how he pretended his socks smelled to make us laugh when he was searching for the scar on his ankle from cutting tobacco. How we hugged him goodbye one night and he asked if I'd bring my fiddle and play it for him next time. How we did play our instruments for him, and Pa listened with a smile, clapping for us on those late summer evenings as cancer was catching up with him.

A couple of weeks before then, we had gathered at our log house for a family dinner. I ran and jumped to hug Pa when he walked in the door, hitting the top of my head on his chin. He laughed it off, rubbing his chin after returning my hug. Then he sent me back into the kitchen to greet Nana who had just come in too.

Quietly, he pulled my dad aside to show him a raised spot that had appeared on his arm. My dad, who had been working in the medical field for years, knew it wasn't a good sign.

That was when the word "melanoma" crept back into our family's vocabulary. Over Pa's years of working outside, the sun had done its silent damage. He'd had one bout with melanoma before, when they thought it had all been removed. But cancer is tricky. It would only be a few weeks from that day until he would pass away quietly at home, early in the morning on September 28th, 2007. My family has told me that, by the time of his death, he was at peace. He was ready to go.

In over two weeks of videos, I watched Pa's illness progress. He had never seemed like an old man to me—doing farm work right up to the end—but in the videos, he struggled to remember details about stories: names, places, events. He'd close his eyes and think for thirty seconds until Dad, whose memory was clearer, had to prompt him. His voice sounded hoarser than I remembered.

At the end of the final video we took of him, two weeks before his death, Dad left the camera rolling while Nana brought Pa his food and medications. She took the wooden Chinese checkerboard and set it across his lap to support a plate of food and a mug holding water or juice. She slipped a pill into the corner of his mouth as he ate and she peered out the window behind him to see if it was fully dark outside, then leaned over to let him kiss her cheek. She took the empty plate and the camera kept recording as he lifted the mug to his mouth, his hands shaking.

He was in his early eighties, but still, this wasn't the Pa I remembered. I don't remember the shaking. Cancer aged him quickly.

One week, Pa was working on his farm, visiting with family, going to church; the next was filled with medical appointments, testing, diagnoses. After that, I began noticing new things: how he seemed tired, and how a white hospital band encircled his wrist.

Then meals were delivered from friends and relatives. The family gathered in Pa and Nana's living room to record him telling stories of his life, and my brother and I played outside while Hospice set up camp in that same living room during the final week.

Then there were funeral preparations and a casket draped by an American flag.

*

On Father's Day in June of 2019, our pastor asked church members to stand and share about their own fathers to celebrate fatherhood during the service. My Dad stood and shared for a moment about Pa, calling Pa our family's "oak tree," a reference to his steadiness, his strength, and the consistent, quiet presence he was for all of us, and still is.

Nana was hummingbirds, lilacs, biscuits drizzled in honey, and neatly annotated books. She was petunias and dusty seashells. She was cicada shells, plucked from the bark of trees and set gently in the cupped palm of my small hand. She was soft, sweet apples and the yellow butterflies that flitted through her front yard. She was not perfect, but my memory has perfected her, as it has tried to perfect many of the details stored in memory that I'm not sure I can trust.

Pa was different. He was the farmland, always providing. He was the spines of old books lined up on wooden shelves, the worn leather of an armchair or Bible cover. He was all the poems that he could recite by Longfellow and Whittier and others. He was sawdust and flannel, the red grip of an old hammer, and blue jeans. He was the slow movement of the hour hand on a clockface. If Nana was a lilac tree, Pa was an oak, and

he stood like one, had the spirit of one: tall and watchful, like the day he helped me rescue the baby bird and then buried it quietly, turning a scrap of ceramic tile into a headstone, not for the bird but for me.

*

In my family, we tell stories.

We hold onto details, phrases, and moments like other families hold onto photos or recipes or heirloom china. Because stories can't be lost or broken like material objects; they are subject to small changes and to memory lapses, but they are meant to be told—handed down—and sometimes, written.

We hold onto some of the stories because they make us laugh with every telling—like Pa throwing a rock at the sun or ordering the supposed mule meat on his dinner plate to turn left. We're reminded of his determination, his sense of humor.

Some stories we tell to remember: how Fern and her children would go out in the cold to do chores and feed the animals, then come back inside and wrap up in quilts next to the fire—and how Nana was dressed like a cat when Pa met her at a Halloween party—and how a harvest moon was rising over the tree line when Pa carried his little boy home from the barn.

And some stories we tell because they hold who we are, or who we want to be, inside them.

Like Fern trusting God with her home and her children—like Pa quietly sending money back from Japan to a family who needed it—like Pa letting a newly-widowed neighbor have her feed ground for free at the mill.

We don't tell the stories to look over our imperfections. We tell them to remind us of the values we are trying to live, day by day, handed down from our ancestors inside the stories.

We let the stories build us each time they're told.

The stories are home. They are family. They are a way that we teach, and communicate, and carry on the legacies of those who came before us. They exist in our minds, in letters, in diaries, in photographs, and in the bark of an old tree, cut down long ago. They show up to us when we need to remember where we came from in order to move forward, like how Pa's life, which started in little more than a shack and a family acquainted with loss, led to my own, in which I will graduate college with an English degree, a storyteller too.

And they show up to us when we gather as a family and share memories, or when we drive through the countryside and see the barns that Pa built and the places where our ancestors lived. They show up when we visit their graves or sift through their letters to each other, letters penned in cursive, faded by age. The stories are what keep their voices alive so that we can remember. Over the years, they have kept Pa alive, and close.

Our lives have been built on the stories, and so, we tell them.