

DEPRESSION DAYS - 1930s

One in a series of

FAMILY SKETCHES

By

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July 1, 2002

Reviewing my file of these Sketches, I ran across the one written in September 1997 entitled "We Tie The Knot", recounting our wedding on September 10, 1930. The last words said: "What happened next? Look for another installment in the saga of Gertrude and Dick soon, on how we coped with the Depression!" I realize I never have kept that "promise"!!! So now, almost 5 years later, I'll do it!

Gertrude and I were married on Wednesday, September 10, 1930. We took the rest of the week for a short honeymoon and the following Monday I reported back for duty as a teller at the Puget Sound Savings & Loan Association.

That bank had impressive space on the east side of 5th Avenue between Union and Pike Streets in Seattle. I had been employed there in 1928 shortly after graduating from Wilson's Modern Business College. My first job with them was as a bookkeeper, posting the daily deposits and withdrawals to the individual bank accounts involved. After about a year I had been promoted to teller but even with the promotion my pay was only \$80 per month - still, that was a LOT in those days!

Upon returning to work from my honeymoon, I was shocked! I was greeted with the news that I was being let go - that the downturn in business meant they had to cut back a position and since I was the last one in * * * * * (PSS&LA merged with a stronger bank - the Mutual Savings Bank - soon afterward but it was not much later that the ongoing Depression caused it to close, never to reopen!)

We had arranged to rent a little one-bedroom house on Allen Place, a few blocks up the hill north from the Fremont District. It was on the rear of a lot behind the owners' home. Now it became necessary to tell our landlords we wouldn't be able to stay because we couldn't pay the rent. Their generous response was touching: "We don't want you to move! We believe you will find another job soon and you can make up the back rent then! If you move, we probably won't be able to find another tenant, anyway, with so many people out of work!" So we agreed to stay on for awhile.

We saw an ad saying that one of those traveling magazine-selling crews was in Seattle and that they were hiring, so we applied. We learned that it was a straight commission deal, a percentage of the value of subscriptions sold, less the value of any food and lodging required. Of course, as long as the crew was in Seattle we could eat and sleep at home.

On this crew, the men made house-to-house calls and the women went office-to-office in business buildings. We were told to memorize a "spiel" which represented ourselves as students earning money to work our way through school. It was pretty shallow, for sure!

We sold a few (very few!) subscriptions in Seattle. Then trouble developed when we moved on to Tacoma and from there to Centralia. We learned that neither of us was much of a sales-person and we were uncomfortable with the fake promotion we were supposed to use. But our main difficulty was that our lodging and food charges began exceeding our credits from commissions. So we quit the crew in Centralia and returned home.

Next, I hooked up with the concession crews that sold refreshments at sporting events. I made this connection because one of my teammates on the baseball team at Garfield High was employed by them. We had the concession at the city's professional hockey arena and at the Seattle Rainiers (Pacific Coast League) baseball park, plus some smaller sporting events. I sold peanuts and popcorn and earned a few dollars at each outing. The problem was that these events only occurred a couple of times each week. We could barely buy enough food to keep us going!

During this same period - the fall of 1930 - I tried to earn some commissions selling a high quality weather-stripping product for insulating windows and doors. It involved showing prospects a miniature kit illustrating how this metal product would interlock when applied to door and window sills. The company would set up appointments with business men to get a new salesman started. An officer of the company went with me on my first call to show me how it should be done and he actually made the sale! I was credited with that commission and I was impressed! I made 8 or 10 calls then on my own but never made another sale! I found out I was no salesman and, furthermore, with the Depression sweeping in, not many were willing to consider spending money for this kind of house improvements! So, I gave it up.

Just before Thanksgiving, our food supply got down to just a small amount of rice, with nothing whatever to go with it - not even salt! I couldn't stand it! We had already disposed of our old-model Essex car and were down to "bare bones", for sure! I still had a nice topcoat, which I had bought for about \$40 back in those prosperous days when I was a bank teller. I took that coat to a pawnbroker as security for a short term loan but he would only risk \$5, he said. I took it!

I then visited a grocery store and loaded up on beans, flour, rolled oats, milk, etc. It was possible to obtain huge quantities of these staples for \$5!! I struggled home with this load. When I entered the door, Gertrude was aghast! She couldn't BELIEVE I would part with that nice warm coat - with winter coming on - for only five dollars! But, at least, we had some food to carry us along for awhile!

It was at that time that we experienced the tremendous act of kindness by a Fremont newsboy which we reported to you as the very first Family Sketch, back in 1997. (That sketch, edited down, became an essay I submitted to the Seattle Times in response to an invitation for readers to write in their reminiscences. It was published by the Times on July 19, 1998 and can STILL be seen on their website archive at: archives.seattletimes.nwsource.com)

What happened was that we had started to walk early on a Sunday morning from our house on Allen Place to our old neighborhood on Rainier Heights, a distance of some six or seven miles. We didn't have a cent of money for carfare. We

knew we could get a good square meal at either my mother's place at 900 23rd Avenue South or at the home of Gertrude's mother at 1101 24th Avenue South. When the newsboy at the Fremont Bridge learned of our plight he loaned us a quarter for carfare, even though he had never seen us before! (We actually had TWO Sunday dinners that day - one at each house!)

Our home church in those days was Bethany Friends. As teenagers there, our pastor was Harry Bundy, ably abetted by his wife Alice. Harry had been replaced before 1930 by his brother, Roy Bundy. It was Harry, though, who came to our rescue that very week!

Harry Bundy was on the staff at the downtown mission for men operated by the Volunteers of America. He heard about our desperate plight and suggested I come in and see him for a job. He arranged for me to go on the payroll as driver of a truck which picked up donations to be sold at the thrift store there. The pay would be \$7 per week plus an "all you can eat" supper each night. As an additional bonus, I was permitted to take home left-overs such as bread, unused (but old) vegetables, etc. We never did go hungry again!

By this time, it was early in the year 1931. Times were VERY bad! Businesses were folding rapidly, leaving offices and stores vacant and boarded up. There was no such thing as welfare, foodstamps, Social Security, Aid to Dependent Children or any of the other social services that are commonplace now. People scrambled to earn ANYTHING to put bread on the table!

About February, 1931, I learned that the Polk Company was hiring people called "enumerators" to go door-to-door throughout the city gathering information for the next issue of their annual City Directory. I talked with Harry Bundy about applying for that work and he encouraged me to go for it. So I made a visit to the Polk Company's office at Western and Marion.

The receptionist asked the purpose of my visit and when I said I wanted to apply for work as an enumerator she exclaimed that those jobs were all long gone! As I was turning away, another idea came to me and a conversation about like this ensued:

: "What about office work? I am trained to be a typist, stenographer or bookkeeper."

"Oh, you'll have to see the Manager about that!"

"May I see him now?"

"No, he's not in just now. Come back tomorrow."

"All right. And who should I ask for?"

"Mr. Peterson"

"Thank you."

The next day I was back. As I approached the front desk, I said "I am here to see Mr. Peterson". Before the receptionist could reply, a man going down the hall behind me stepped up and said, "I'm Peterson. What can I do for you?" I turned to see a tall angular man with a superb handlebar mustache - a real "throwback" in appearance!

I explained that I was an expert typist and was looking for office work. He was on the point of dismissing me and then reversed himself and said, "Come with me. I want to show you something".

Taking me into his office, he brought in several dozen long sheets of typewritten names and addresses, explaining that these were lists of employees turned in by factories and businesses in the city. People were engaged in copying the information in longhand from these lists onto little rectangular forms about 1" x 2", which were perforated on sheets about 8" x 10". These were then detached and sorted alphabetically to produce the city directory. He asked me if I thought it would be faster to copy the information from the lists onto these little forms by typing them rather than by the pen and ink method being used. I said I was sure it would be much faster!

He took me to an adjacent room where there was a typewriter on a desk, handed me a list of names received from a company and a sheet of the little census forms and said, "Show me!"

Well, I could type 60-plus words per minute in those days so I sat down and rattled off the page full of census forms in jig time, I assure you! His eyes grew wider and wider as I sped through the process and he hired me on the spot at the same pay as enumerators received: \$15 per week! Of course, I left the job at the V of A with appropriate thanks to Harry and with his hearty approval!

Mr. Peterson said he was going to call the employment agency and get a half dozen typists to report the following Monday to form a typing pool to do this job. Then he asked if I knew anyone that could type who would be looking for work. I told him that my wife, Gertrude, was a typist - that she didn't have quite as much speed as I but would be accurate and reliable. He said to bring her in!

We joined the typing pool the following Monday and everything went extremely well. "Modern technology" had been installed to do these census forms!! Mr. Peterson gleefully set up a contest to see which typists could turn in the most sheets of census records each 8-hour day! One of the typists was a young fellow named Sid Kalman who had been a classmate of mine at Garfield High years before. He was good! Each day, the highest marks were turned in by either Kalman or me!

This went on for a couple of months. In the middle of that time frame both Gertrude and I suffered an attack of the flu but we didn't dare "call in sick" under the circumstances. We would struggle down and stick it out through the day, then go home and fall into bed. Eating was out of the question! After a week or so, we recovered!

When we started to run out of the industrial lists of employees to do, Mr. Peterson began laying off the typists one by one, starting with those who were the slowest. It came Gertrude's turn eventually - but in the meantime that \$30 per week we had been earning was a bonanza! (No income tax or Social Security withholding, either!) At last, only Kalman and I were left!

At that point, Mr. Peterson told me he intended to keep me on, doing "mailing lists". These were lists of people taken from the directory records who were in a certain neighborhood or who were in special professions, e.g.: lawyers, doctors, automobile mechanics, etc. Business people would order these special lists

made up so the people on them could be targeted for products or services sold by them. I continued on this level for two or three months after the typing pool was gone.

One day, Mr. Peterson confided in me that the company bookkeeper was leaving and he planned to promote his personal secretary to fill that vacancy. As he knew I had taken shorthand in business college, he asked if I would like to step in as his personal secretary - at \$16.50 per week? Of COURSE I would! So I became the only male secretary I had ever heard of up to that time!

A year earlier I had passed a City Civil Service examination as a Clerk-Typist. As you know, the results of these examinations determine who is at the top of the list for jobs and they gradually make appointments down the list of eligibles. They finally reached my name after I had been at the Polk Company for about six months. It was an appointment to the Police Department as a "Report Clerk", paying \$135 per month! That was about TWICE as much as I was earning as Mr. Peterson's secretary!

I went in on a Friday morning for an interview and the man doing the hiring said everything was in order and I was to report the following Monday at 8 AM. I demurred, saying I really felt obligated to give my present employer a week or two's notice that I was leaving. He gave me an ultimatum: either I report as instructed or he would hire the next person on the list! I said I would report!

Mr. Peterson happened to be in Spokane over that Friday and over the weekend, so I sent him a telegram explaining that I had this new job and had to leave abruptly and that I would be in to see him Monday afternoon to explain it fully. After my explanation, he said I had done the right thing - that he would have done exactly that same thing if it were he!

I won't go into detail to explain the job of Report Clerks at Police Headquarters except to say that it was we who received calls from the public reporting thefts, robberies, assaults, or other crimes or potential ones. Some were emergencies, involving dispatch of "prowler cars" or - if in the downtown area - sending out two or more officers from the Emergency Squad based at Headquarters. We wrote all this information up in individual reports, using a teletype connected with the Precincts in West Seattle, Georgetown, Rainier Valley and Wallingford, with a copy to the Detective Division where follow-up was needed. A summary of the important reports was typed at the end of each shift and these were incorporated into a bulletin system distributed to the appropriate officers on ensuing shifts.

After 4 years(1935), I entered the Federal Civil Service and the rest is history! We were Depression Survivors!

This is getting very lengthy but I think one other involved detail should be included. That has to do with our housing experience during this period of time.

I have already mentioned that we started in a house on Allen Place but after a couple of months there, we moved to the the house where Gertrude's mother lived at 24th S. & Norman. The upper floor was not being used and with minor modifications it became an acceptable "apartment", with its own seperate entrance. We continued there until I started working in the Police Department, when we

moved to a lovely rental house on 83rd and 3rd Ave NE, out in the North End of Seattle. We were tipped off to this place by a police officer named Holman on my shift who lived in the house next door. The rent was modest and it was just the right size for the two of us!

After living there about a year, we moved to a little larger house with a tremendous view over Lake Washington, on 32nd Avenue South. The reason for our move was that the rent was less - just \$15 per month!! The owner was a little old man who lived in McCleary, Washington, down near Olympia. He would drive up to Seattle in a rattletrap sort of flivver each month to collect the rent. He also owned the house next door south of us but it was vacant.

One day, a man from the Seattle National Bank came knocking on our door and said he wanted to inspect the house because they were going to foreclose on a loan they had on it, and put it on the market. When I arrived home from work, Gertrude and I talked about this, wondering what we were going to do when the house was sold out from under us!!

During the time I was working at Puget Sound Savings, I was playing basketball on a team in the Commercial League sponsored by that same bank - the Seattle National Bank - then one of the largest in town. The captain of the team was a loan officer at that bank. I decided to go talk to him.

At the bank, I asked the loan officer (whose name escapes me just now) about this foreclosure. Here's the way the conversation went:

"Why don't YOU buy it?"

"How can I buy a house? I don't have any resources except the check I receive twice a month from the City!"

"How much would you be able to spare out of your next check in an emergency?"

"Maybe \$25."

"OK, we could take \$25 down - and how much could you pay per month?"

"Well, we have a hard time meeting our rent each month, which is \$15."

"OK, you've got a deal - \$25 down and \$15 per month until the loan we have on the property, \$3,000 or so, is paid off. AND THAT INCLUDES THE VACANT HOUSE NEXT DOOR, TOO!!!"

WOW! Well, It just happened that my brother Albert was looking for a house at that time, too, so I asked if we could buy these houses together, splitting the payments down the middle. That was OK with the bank, so that's what happened! We each bought a house for \$12.50 down and \$7.50 per month!

We made some minor alterations and eventually sold that house after we had moved to McNeil Island at a nice profit, even including the cost of the alterations.

In looking back on this chain of events now, I can't help but marvel at how our Lord cares for His own! We were neophytes of the greenest type, often stumbling and feeling our way - but God extended His marvelous grace to care for us! Truly, the Great Shepherd!