

Random Memories of my Dad
George H. Rohrer
1904-1953

Above all I would emphasize his desire for peace and quite. He disliked blaring lights and noise. He hated barking dogs and loud people. He loved the woods and just wanted a little cozy place with no neighbors. He could not stand arguing, bickering, discord, nagging or confusion and just wanted to be left alone. He felt strongly, "If you want something done right, that you must do it yourself". He loved a fresh tomato, and would eat it like an apple with his salt shaker right at hand. He also loved scallions and radishes with salt. He had a passion for big soft easy chairs for snuggling, reading or listening to the Metropolitan Opera. He not only enjoyed listening, but was eager to participate as well. He sang in the church choir, was a member of the glee club and informally he loved someone to play a piano so he could sing along. He loved to read and had a passion for books about the Civil War; in fact, he named me after the great southern General.

He hated all cities, especially New York. He really wanted to work outside, and his profession of choice was to be a civil engineer building roads and bridges and other public works projects. He did not identify the oil business as a top choice and only ended up there because of the pressure of the times. He hated what he called "pot bellied" politicians and felt their mismanagement of the country had caused the Great Depression. He loved Kerhonkson, NY, and wanted to live there in a little cabin with my Mom. He had the idea that he could learn to be a farmer and could grow all their food in a little garden. He really liked the idea of being a "Hick".

He loved German food and his favorite meal was pork chops, mashed potatoes, sauerkraut and apple sauce. He did not like spinach or Jell-O. He preferred chicken to steak and was sick of French fries, which he said they served every day, for months in South America. His favorite restaurant was the Wayside Inn in Denville, New Jersey. It was a sad day when it burned down. The Harbor in Parsippany, New Jersey was also nice but there was nothing like the formal perfection of the Wayside Inn. The influence of this place set all my future dining standards.

He rolled his own cigarettes but later switched to Regent's in a crush poof box. However, his Bull Durham and "papers" were never far away. Occasionally he also enjoyed a cigar. He liked loose clothes like sailor pants and the 40's answer to a T-shirt. He was meticulous about his personal hygiene and appearance. At some point in his youth, he got two tattoos, one on each forearm. I can not remember them very well but they were quite large. I am almost positive one was a crucifix with additional religious verbiage. He did not like swimming or short sleeves because he was later self-conscious of and embarrassed about the tattoos.

He had wispy blond hair, what there was of it, and a trim little mustache. He registered for the draft in early February 1942 and shortly after attempted to join the United States Marine Corps. I have the letter turning him down as 4-F for a dental condition. I think what they were really saying was a guy in his late thirties with a three-year-old and a pregnant wife did not need to be going off to the South Pacific. I made up for that one Dad.

He was a very good dancer and literally "swept Mom off her feet". I can also remember him tap dancing – or doing the old "soft shoe" on the hard wood floors in our home in Towaco, New Jersey. He thought Florida was the closest place to paradise on earth and he wanted to honeymoon there. He had no interest in Atlantic City and could not understand why anyone would want to go there. New York "Wise guys" were a real turn off for him. He hated the bohunk "Tirty Terd Street" speech pattern. He also hated profanity and profane people. In all of the South American letters, there is not so much as a Hell or a damn. Later with the frustrations of "matrimony", I did hear him use a few of those benign words, but never anything vulgar. I vividly remember him challenging a guy in Towaco, for using "bad language" in front of me.

He loved the State Theater in Boonton and, in fact, he really liked Boonton. He liked to chop wood and fancied himself a bit of a "lumberjack". He had worked in a lumber camp in Florida. He also had great memories of his days on the railroad and loved the idea of sitting high in a caboose and looking out the window as the world passed by. For some reason, he really enjoyed mowing our lawn – probably because he never had one in Jersey City. He also liked playing with words and phrases like "maunlower" and "take the horn by the bulls".

His paper was the New York Herald Tribune and he always wanted to see the funnies so he could check up on the Katzenjammer Kids. He also loved nicknames. My Uncle Jack was General Nuisance; My Aunt Norma was Major Tired; his sweetheart, my Mom, was Fatty, Twinkle and Twitty, my brother John was Honnus and I was Bub. I did not like that name because I thought he was making fun of me. Years later, I learned from one of Theodor Reik's books that Bub is an affectionate German nickname for Robert. I was so defensive.

When my brother John was a little boy Dad used to love to take him for walks and look for flowers, butterflies and caterpillars (cakapukers). I can still see him holding buttercups under John's chin to see if he was made of butter. He liked Ford, Chrysler and DeSoto and specifically told my mother to avoid a "Chevy". However, he bought Buick's from Bill Birch in Dover, New Jersey no doubt, because he had been friends with Bill during the depression. It was a real reward to be able to buy a new car from a guy "who knew him when".

At 5' 8" and 140, he was not physically large but he was a man who made the most of his ability. I wish I had his waist. He was a baseball pitcher for both the SOV and Gulf oil teams. He bought me a catcher's mitt so we could play in the driveway and I can still remember how my hand would burn catching his pitches. He loved to fish and was an accomplished fisherman, and in South America he caught some of the fiercest fish I have ever seen or heard of. As a golfer he was shooting in the 80's and would beat me "hands down"; and he refers many times to his tennis game. He also enjoyed watching the Friday night "fights". He took me to a professional match once in Dover. He also enjoyed a good game of bridge but preferred dominoes because of its numeric challenge. At picnics, he enjoyed playing horseshoes with Mountain Lakes friends Art Granzen, Stuart Mitchell and Ted Milkey.

He looked forward to having children and wanted a little girl with blond curly hair and "big" brown eyes just like my mother. In fact, twins would have suited him just fine. He spoke of having a little Marion and a George Jr. My Mom had decided on the name Nancy if I had been a girl. I do not know how he put up with me. I lost his South American treasures; left his tools outside to rust; and showed no academic promise. Had he lived he would **not** have been proud of me as an adolescent or as a young man. I like to believe he would be now.

My son Steven inherited his physical stature and his love of fishing; my son Jaron inherited his disposition and interest in golf. He enjoyed a cold beer after cutting the grass and made a regular pilgrimage out of going to the local "spring" for gallon jugs of fresh water. He never used a washcloth and taught me how to wash my face with my hands. He also showed me how to "cup" my hands for a drink out of a stream (you could do that then) and how to drink from a gallon jug over my shoulder using my index finger through the "loop".

He loved dogs and hated cruelty. He minded his own business and expected others to do the same. He always worked hard to improve himself academically, from his early days at International Correspondence Schools to Columbia University and later Alexander Hamilton Institute. A college degree eluded him and he felt "held back" without that credential. I made up for that one too Dad.

He always stopped for a beer at Wally's, a little tavern on Route 202 just short of the Reservoir Bridge in Parsippany, New Jersey. He had known the bartender during the hard days of the early 1930's, and now enjoyed pulling up in his Roadmaster with his family. Unfortunately, Mom never went in to meet his old friends. She thought Wally's was a "dive", and "Miss goody two shoes" from Mountain Lakes, would not be seen in such a place. I can still see her sitting in the car alone, her arms crossed and sporting her horse face, as Dad called it. She missed so much and it would have been so important to him if she could have loosened up a little. At least John and I were inside with him, playing shuffleboard, shooting the light gun and having a birch beer. He knew the barbers on Cornelia Street in Boonton very well too, and it was a big deal in the 1940's to walk down to the barbershop with Dad.

In his letters he acknowledged his personal situation, which he referred to as his "fix" of never knowing his father. He **never** even once mentions not knowing his mother, or even the concept of motherhood. There was a hole in his soul when it came to the idea of maternity and this influenced his whole attitude toward women. The woman of his dreams would not only have to fulfill his romantic and sexual desire, but also meet his maternal ideals. He was a family man and the concept of a family was very important to him.

He was a fatalist and firmly believed “Whatever will be, will be.” He was not much of a churchgoer but ended many of his South American letters with God bless you and he even talked about praying.

Most of all George and Marion were in Love. My mother had known him for two years before he left for Venezuela; she waited for him for sixteen months against constant pressure from her parents; and she professed her love for him until the day she died. There was never anyone to take the place of her “George”. This is sad in many ways, especially since she was only 42 when he died. He also made a total commitment to her; he felt she had saved him in his greatest time of need; and he sent all his Gulf Oil earnings back to her in the form of an allotment. He kept just enough to buy toiletries, cigarettes and an occasional beer. If anything, he idealized her too much. She would never be able to live up to the image he created. Absence does make the heart grow fonder and we can certainly see that at work in his letters.

I got to know my father by reading all the letters he had sent to my mother when he was in South America in 1934. I had no initial interest in reading these old letters, but I did skim them between 1984 and 1992. Later it slowly dawned on me, that these letters were the keys to knowing the father, I had never really known. I was thirteen when he died and young boys do not pay much attention to their fathers. Then when they are gone it is too late.

In all, there are nearly one hundred and fifty envelopes with the majority containing more than one letter, and with each of them consisting of 3 to 12 closely written pages. To save postage he wrote a lot of them on both sides of onionskin paper, making them extremely hard to read. I did not count pages, but would estimate 1,350. The letters are in two batches, the first of which my mother gave me in the early 1980’ s. I did not know of the second batch until after her death. The second group is the more intimate and romantic. She had kept these in her dresser for nearly 70 years and had, obviously, reread them all to select the ones she initially gave me.

When I read these letters at age 62 they were an eerie experience for me. Reading the passionate love and painful frustrations of a thirty-year-old...in some strange way, I was *his* father. I have laughed and cried, but mostly I have longed to reach out across the sands of time to help this wonderful young man. That is not possible, but now he is in my thoughts more than ever.

The thing that will always impress me is how my Mom brought him home from the hospital in December of 1952. She made his last Christmas Holidays so warm. She had been told he was dying within weeks but was able to keep the awful truth from him. This was brute strength and absolute love. I can still see him sitting in the Granzen’ s living room the day he came home from the hospital. He really looked well. By early January we were in the middle of an ice storm and had no heat or power for nearly a week. He was suffering greatly from the cancer and the conditions. I can still see myself standing at the top of the stairs in our Towaco home as the ambulance staff carried him away. I never saw him again.

There is no question, I am proud to know that George Emil Hilldring Rohrer was my father. I will have special thoughts of him on May 25, 2004, the 100th anniversary of his birth.