

## Dan Morrill's Boyhood

1937-1951

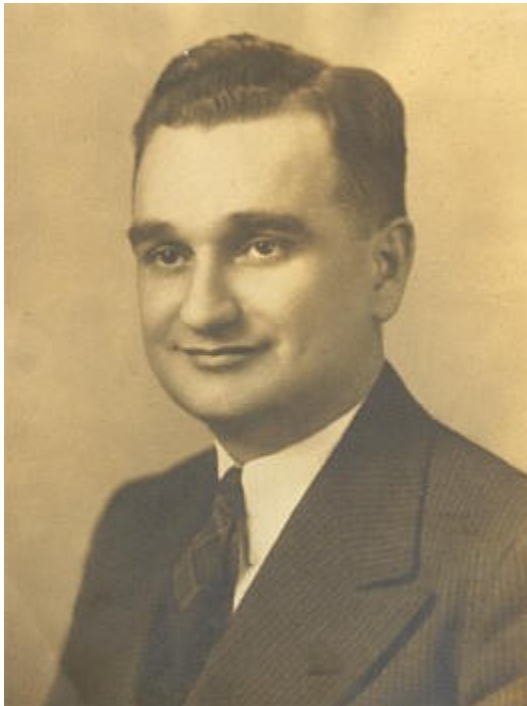
I make no claims that my childhood is worthy of an essay, but it is part of my family's heritage. If we do not tell the stories, they will be forgotten. That's why I wrote it. Dan L. Morrill. December 1998

My mother, Helen Virginia Nowell Morrill was born May 28, 1912, at home in Winston-Salem and attended the public schools of that city until she graduated from Reynolds High School. Mother enrolled at Salem College, which she attended for one and one half years before marrying my father. After living briefly in Raleigh, mother and father moved to Wilmington, N.C., where daddy became the manager of the Firestone Store. My father, James Roy Morrill, was born January 19, 1907 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Kenyon College. My brother, Jimmie - James Roy Morrill III, was born on March 18, 1934 in Wilmington. I remember returning to Wilmington many years later with my mother who visited with people whom she had known there. All in all, mother and father were content in Wilmington, except that my mother's in-laws, James Roy Morrill and Ethelinda Lincoln Morrill, moved south from Grand Rapids because my grandfather had lost his job due to the Great Depression and took up residence with my mother and father. Happily, my paternal grandparents eventually moved to Winston-Salem and lived for a short time next to my maternal grandparents' house on Spruce St. in Winston-Salem. My paternal grandfather, whom everybody called "Pop," obtained a job in the office supply business -- the same type of job he had had in Michigan.



Helen Virginia Nowell Morrill

In 1936, my mother, father, and brother moved to Charlotte, where my father became an assistant district manager with Firestone. The Charlotte years were not easy for my mother and father. I think Dad wanted more social life than my mother was interested in. I remember my mother saying how hurt she was when my father did not accompany her to the hospital when I was due. According to her, she went by the Mecklenburg Hotel in Charlotte to tell dad she was in pain and was going to the hospital. He was having lunch and said he would come to the hospital when he finished. She also resented my father not taking her to a company party at Lake Wylie near Charlotte because he was embarrassed to have her seen pregnant -- at least that is my mother's version of the story. After I was born my mother was ill and I was cared for by a kind Charlotte family. I have no memory of my early Charlotte days.



James Roy Morrill Jr.

In 1938, my mother, father, brother and I moved to Winston-Salem, where my father became the manager of the same Firestone store that he had come to as a trainee in 1929. He remained in that position throughout my childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. Our family moved into a rental house on Maplewood Avenue in the Ardmore section. It was here that I have my first memories. I can vaguely remember playing on the front porch of the house. The floor was made of cut, red tile, and I recall that it was cool. My mother told me one memorable story. Apparently, she was bathing me one day in that house and for some reason was distracted. I ran out of the house during that interim stark naked and got several doors down the street before my mother realized I was gone. My grandmother, MawMaw kept me quite a bit before I started to school. My mother had many spells of dizziness and often could not stand. She improved when I started to school but often had severe headaches.

I distinctly remember walking with my mother down Maplewood Avenue to visit our new house that was under construction. The year was 1940. The Cape Cod style plans came from a house mother had visited and liked in Greensboro owned by a man named Patterson, who also worked for Firestone. I can still see the workmen scurrying about the lot. To my best recollection, mother, my brother Jimmie, dad, and I had a meal in a breakfast nook in the kitchen even before the house was completely finished. That breakfast nook was where we ate meals except when we had company. It had an "L-shape" bench seat and a red, linoleum table top. I sat the farthest in, my brother sat to my left, daddy at the end of the table, and mother sat in a chair opposite me so she could go about her business as she served the meal.



My Paternal Grandparents, Nana and Pop - James Roy Morrill Sr. and Ethelinda Lincoln Morrill

I remember visiting both sets of grandparents. Pop and his wife Ethel, a redhead, whom we called "Nana," lived in a big frame house on Walkertown Road. "Pop" was a dramatic character. He had dark, bushy eyebrows, lots of body hair, and a swarthy complexion. I learned many years later that he was born illegitimate, supposedly in Ontario, Canada to a Bremner (department store owner) and a Williams, and was adopted by a family named "Morrill." Pop was outspoken, proud and assertive. My brother had warned me about Pop, suggesting that he was a somewhat prickly character. One of the early family stories about me was my saying in Pop's presence, "Jimmie, Pop is not so bad." Everybody had a good laugh. Nana was fat. I remember I felt embarrassed being seen with her in public. Nana, however, was intelligent and independent minded, although she gave way to Pop on all matters of contention between them. Nana's maiden name was "Lincoln." Her father had worked for the telephone company in Lowell, Mass., and had moved to Michigan, where Nana had met Pop. I remember their telling me that they loved to dance, although I never saw them do so. I think they met at a marathon dance contest. Nana had diabetes but lived the longest, into her early 90s, of my four grandparents. She died in New Hampshire where her son, Clinton Lincoln Morrill, lived. She outlived Clinton (Uncle Buss) and her daughter-in-law, Polly, oversaw her care. Nana also outlived my father who died of colon cancer in 1963.



This is James Nowell, my maternal grandfather.

Jim Nowell, my mother's father, (we called him "PawPaw") was a resourceful but uneducated man. A native of Raleigh, N.C., he came to work in a foundry. Sometime thereafter, he met and married Myrtle Thornbro. I think she was only about 15 when they married. I do know she was 16 when she gave birth to my mother. PawPaw was a man of few words, and I never saw him drive a car. My earliest memories of him have him sitting at a radio listening to baseball games and continuously puffing on Camel cigarettes. He had played semi-pro baseball in Raleigh as a young fellow. I think he was a catcher.

Jim and Myrtle Nowell had little to say to one another. They did sleep in the same bed, but I think he had been unfaithful at some point in the marriage. The only time I saw them together was at the dinner table. Pawpaw loved chicken and dumplings, country butter, biscuits, and Karo syrup. Myrtle, we called her "MawMaw," was a somewhat melancholic person. Her father grew up in the country near Kernersville, N.C., between Winston-Salem and Greensboro. MawMaw was intelligent, interested in public affairs, and a lover of beauty. I spent a lot of time with MawMaw, because she would baby-sit me while my mother meandered about town and my brother was in school. She liked to play Chinese checkers, pour Jergen's lotion on my hands, and show me her Cuckoo Clock. I have always enjoyed hearing a clock tick. I bet that comes from my days at MawMaw's. A special treat was sitting on the swing on MawMaw's front porch and watching the cars zip by. Pawpaw enjoyed sitting on the porch too. Their house was on a steep hill on First Street in Winston-Salem.



This is Myrtle Thornbro Nowell, my maternal grandmother.

My mother and father established a pleasant home for my brother and me. Dad had conventional, middle class values. Highly intelligent but not an intellectual, he excelled as an organizer. In addition to managing the Firestone Store, he was active in the Chamber of Commerce, the Salvation Army, the Episcopal Church, and especially the Lions Club. He became a leader of whatever activity he undertook and enjoyed the respect of a broad range of people. Dad was a very distinguished looking man. Frugality, hard work, and integrity were all highly important to him. His greatest weakness was an inability to understand that other people might have legitimate notions that differed from his. He did not impose his authority by yelling or screaming -- I never heard Dad raise his voice. It was just that one did not feel comfortable discussing disagreements with him. This led to tension between my mother and father, especially over the issue of money. Dad controlled all finances and gave my mother a weekly allowance. Often my mother would exceed her budget. Rather than asking dad for more money, mother would hide from the milkman when he came to collect the money. I distinctly remember her telling my brother and me to be quiet because the milkman was at the door. To save money so she would have enough to go shopping, decorate and create, mother would mow the grass. I recall with

some displeasure my brother and me helping mother push the mower across the yard. Dad thought mom had paid somebody else to cut the grass. When mother exceeded her budget, Dad reduced next week's allowance by an equal amount. One day mother went to the Firestone Store to get her allowance and told dad that if he "docked" her allowance she would scream. He did, and she went out to the concourse of the store and started screaming. People gathered around to ascertain what was wrong. This episode so embarrassed my father that he never "docked" mother's allowance again. My mother never felt that she had enough money to spend.



This is one of my favorites photographs. It was taken when our house on Maplewood Avenue was brand new. My father is on the left, then my brother Jimmie, then my mother, and I am the little fellow standing in front of my paternal grandmother.

Another point of potential explosiveness between my mother and father was MawMaw. I never completely understood the reasons, but my mother, who was fiercely independent, had feelings of resentment toward her mother. When mother and dad had a disagreement they usually did not confront it directly and talk it out. Mother would simply refuse to talk to dad, sometimes for several days. I recall an especially intense period when I was a teenager. Apparently, dad told mother that she reminded him of MawMaw. Oh me, that really upset mother. The chill in the air was oppressive for about a week. I was the recipient of her "silent treatment" on one occasion. I must have been 12 or 13. Mother and dad came back from a trip to New York City. I jokingly asked mother why she hadn't jumped off the Empire State Building while she was there. My unintentionally insensitive remark deeply hurt my mother, and she refused to interact with me for several days. About the only time I heard mother and dad talking at length was when they were in bed late at night. I could hear the mumble of their voices but could not make out what they were saying.



This is my cousin Dorothy "Dottie" Nowell. She is the daughter of my mother's only brother

I only remember two times that my father became really angry with me when I was a young boy. One day he came home from work -- that was always a big event in the day -- and he saw me playing in the street. I'm sure that dad was concerned about my safety, but I only knew that he locked me in the bathroom for a while -- a terrifying experience. The other time was when I took his eyeglasses and carried them into the yard to play with them and broke them. I don't remember the punishment, but dad was highly displeased -- I'm sure partly because it cost him money. My father enjoyed playing catch with me. We would stand in the back yard and throw a baseball back and forth. He would always remind me to "keep my eye on the ball." I also remember his taking my brother and me to watch a huge parachute jump during World War Two. Hundreds of planes were involved. It must have been at or near Fort Bragg near Southern Pines. My father also took my brother and me to the movies on Saturdays and to church on Sunday mornings. Mother did not usually attend church services but helped with fundraising dinners at St. Timothy's.

My father was very close to his brother, who was an Episcopal priest in New Hampshire. We called him "Uncle Bus." During his childhood somebody had said that Bus looked like a bus. Bus favored his mother physically, a barrel-chested redhead, while my dad was dark and swarthy like his father. There was also great warmth between my father and his parents. I never heard him say one unkind thing about them. Dad did not talk much about feelings or emotions. He was an analytical thinker. Dad always respected PawPaw and MawMaw as mom's parents, but he never became close to them.

My mother was a multi-talented, interesting human being but had learned early on to keep many of her feelings and attitudes to herself. She was a romantic and lived in her own fantasy world. She had been captivated by movie stars in the 1920's. She especially liked Tyrone Power. On summer vacations during World War Two she would drive by the cottage he was staying in at Atlantic Beach near Morehead City to see if she could catch a glimpse of him. She liked to sing, sew, decorate, entertain, paint, go to the movie house and keep scrap books on movie stars. My early memories of my mother are fundamentally

positive. A good organizer and essentially self-confident, mother was always undertaking a project. She felt much better and more energetic after she started taking diet pills, dexedrine, which she took many years. She had dirt hauled in and completely reshaped the landscaping of the back yard. She attempted to transform our basement into a sitting room. She constructed the foundation for a major expansion of the screened porch on the side of our house. She painted palms trees and little African boys on our walls. She said she often wished as a child she had been a boy instead of a girl. She had broad shoulders, curly brown hair, big hands, narrow hips, thin legs and small feet. She was 5 feet 2 inches in height. My father was 5 feet 8 inches tall. I am six feet, two inches tall.

My mother chafed at the constraints put on suburban females of her day. Mother always preferred the company of men. She and Pop, for example, liked one another, while there was tension between mother and Nana. She also enjoyed Bus's company. I remember that they would take walks together when the family vacationed at Morehead City. Bus's wife, Helen, would stay in the cottage with Nancy Lou, her daughter, a girl who was below average in intelligence according to Bus. Mother refused to fit anybody's image of what she should be, including the dutiful daughter-in-law. Mother was essentially a "live and let live" person. You leave me alone, and I will leave you alone. Her determination not to be controlled appeared to be almost uncaring.

One manifestation of my mother's feelings of stress were the periodic occurrences of vertigo. One day, when she took me shopping with her, we went into Williams Grocery Store on Hawthorne Road, and she collapsed on the floor. The clerks rushed about until she was able to get up. Another memorable event occurred one day when mother and I were at home while Jimmie was at school and daddy at work. I must have been about 5. Again, she collapsed on the floor. She managed to crawl into bed and told me I had to call MawMaw and summon her to our house. I did not know how to dial a phone and barely knew my numbers. Mother told me MawMaw's number, and I somehow was able to make the call. MawMaw arrived about an hour later by bus.



This is my cousin Nancy Lou, Bus's daughter. She had a sad life and died in her 40's.



My relationship with my brother Jimmie had the normal amount of sibling rivalry. He was three and a half years older than me, which meant that we had little in common as young children. I do remember our playing together in our parents' bedroom, where we would lay two chairs back to back on the floor and pretend they were cockpits in an airplane. Jimmie was always the pilot. Our most substantial interaction had to do with a large, impressive collection of Lionel electric train equipment that our parents gave us. Jimmie would put the train layout up in our bedroom, laying track from one end to the other. My job was basically to watch or help when needed. There was one unsettling incident involving my brother. I was sitting on the stairs to our basement when I was about 5, and I fell to floor, struck my head, lost consciousness, and suffered a concussion. Jimmie had pushed me off the stairs. I think Jimmie sometimes resented my presence in the family and regarded me as an interloper, a not unusual attitude in an older sibling.

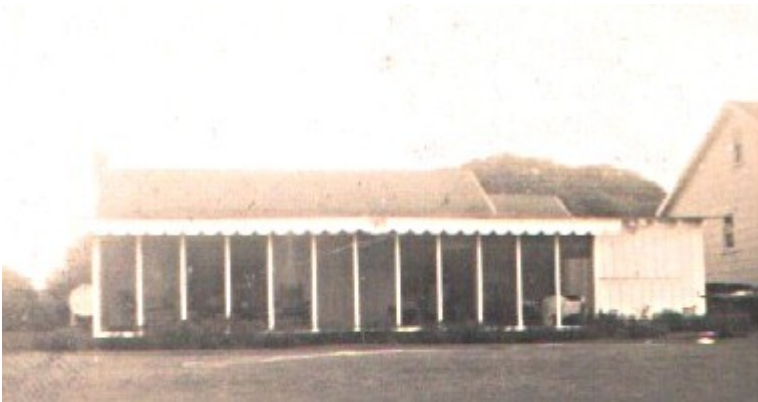
There were two major family festivals each year. One was Christmas. My father was a Christmas enthusiast of the highest order, a love that he had learned from his parents. Nana and Pop always came from Morehead City and spent their Christmas vacation at our house in Winston-Salem. Dad would spend weeks wrapping presents. Always the skilled administrator, Dad kept a record of every gift to make certain he spent the same amount of money on my brother's and my presents. As long as we believed in Santa Claus, Jimmie and I had our presents placed under the Christmas tree. My side was the left side as we faced the tree, and his presents were on the right. The tree was a major production. It was a huge cedar tree painted white and placed at the eastern end of the living room. Everybody, but especially dad, spent days decorating the tree. We had large, multi-colored lights, lots of icicles, plenty of ornaments. Nana and Pop made marshmallow dolls to put on the tree. The dresses were made of crepe paper, and the faces, always happy, were painted on with chocolate. I thought everything was beautiful. It was like a fairy land. I remember one year, however, when the tree fell down after it was decorated. It was like having a painted redwood on the floor. Happily, dad was able to put it back up.

The adults opened their presents on Christmas Eve in a session that usually started around 8 p.m. and lasted until about 1 a. m. One person opened a present, and everybody else had to watch. In addition to mother, dad, Pop and Nana, the crowd included MawMaw and PawPaw and their son James and his wife, Dorothy. Jimmie and I joined the party after we learned about Santa Claus, as did James's and Dorothy's daughter, whom we called "Dottie Dear." A good time was had by all. Mother prepared a meal, traditional turkey, dressing, etc., and served it in our dining room at mid-day on Christmas Day. Dad always wanted the turkey brought to the table "steaming." Nana made "Yankee" dressing. It was dry and pressed into cakes.



This picture was made c.1954 on Nana and Pop's 50th wedding anniversary. Dad's brother Clinton "Bus" Morrill is on the far right.

Thanks to my Aunt Dorothy, I have one tangible connection with my early Christmases. There is a fine, Victorian roll top desk in my house in Charlotte. Pop acquired it from one of his aunts, I think, and brought it South with him when he settled in North Carolina in the mid-1930's. It was made in Grand Rapids, Mich., which was once known as a fine furniture making center. Pop loved that desk, but when he moved to Morehead City he found that the high humidity and salt air were damaging it. He decided to give it to my mother as a Christmas present. He brought it to Winston on a trailer, probably about 1950, and parked it on the street behind my parents' house. The presentation of the desk was "the event" of that Christmas. It stayed in the living room of my boyhood home for many years, but my mother let my Aunt Dorothy put it in her home when my mother's tastes moved away from the Victorian. Happily, I got it some time later and brought it to Charlotte.



Nana and Pop's House in Morehead City. I have many strong memories of this place. If you look carefully you can see the chairs where we used to sit on many a summer evening. The house has been destroyed.

The other yearly ritual was summer vacation. After Nana and Pop moved to Morehead City, we always went there. Uncle Bus and his wife, Helen, and their daughter, Nancy Lou, would join us, sometimes coming to Winston-Salem and accompanying us to Morehead City. I can recall how excited I was about

getting up before dawn and helping my father and brother pack the car before leaving. Nana and Pop bought a house on Shepherd Street that fronted on Bogue Sound. Everybody would stay there, usually for about three weeks. The whole lifestyle centered around fishing. Pop had three boats, and we would use them to go out into Bogue Sound. Sometimes we fished at night for sea trout. Another favorite was going after sheepshead, which meant that we had to tie the boat up under the bridge leading from Morehead City to Atlantic Beach. We would clean the fish we caught, and Nana would prepare them for supper. At night Nana, Pop, dad, mother, Bus, and Helen would sit on the large screened porch at the front of the house and discuss all sorts of things. I have pleasant memories of lying on a cot and listening to what they had to say. They would reminisce, comment on affairs of the day, or just sit and watch the moonlight on the water.



My Father with his brother Clinton Lincoln Morrill or Bus. They were very close.

Uncle Bus was a most intriguing, charismatic fellow. He would tell Jimmie, Nancy Lou and me wonderful ghost stories before we went to bed. The three of us slept on cots on the screened porch. I really enjoyed that. Uncle Bus also invented a game we called "Goggles." Somewhere he had obtained a pair of Army surplus goggles that had dark purple lenses. The idea was that one person would put on the goggles and endeavor to locate everybody else. The players were the three children and Uncle Bus. I think part of Bus's motivation was to let the adults have some time without children being under foot all the time. The whole family played card games. Bridge and cribbage were the favorites.

I was particularly fascinated with how the drawbridge operated that I could see from Nana's and Pop's house. I built models of the bridge with wooden blocks or playing cards and pretended that I was the bridge keeper. I recall that I visited the bridge keeper one day and even road on the draw bridge. That was really exciting. There was one other place I enjoyed visiting. Fort Macon, a 19th century fort, was located on the northern end of Bogue Banks across the sound from my grandparents' house. I went

with my dad and Jimmie to take a tour and memorized as many facts as possible. Later I conducted tours for members of the family, carefully telling them the whole story of Fort Macon. This was my first foray into the profession of historic preservation.

Summer vacations had their stressful moments. Indeed, my antipathy for vacations at the beach probably arises from unpleasant memories of being at Nana's and Pop's house in Morehead City as a child. There were many things that I did not like. I remember how horrible the marshes smelled, especially after a rain. We would go over to Atlantic Beach to go swimming in the ocean. I hated it. I could not swim, which meant I had to stay on shore. I would walk along the beach and notice little puddles of sea water that were left behind as the tide moved out. I thought they were nasty. I also did not like the foam created by the sea water as it washed up on the beach. When we returned to Nana's and Pop's house, everybody would pile out of the car and walk into the house, leaving wet foot marks and sand on the floor. I didn't like the way that looked either. Also, especially after I became obese in the fourth grade, I despised putting on a bathing suit and not wearing a shirt. I was really embarrassed by the way I looked. I was always happy when we started back to Winston-Salem.



My brother Jimmie

Sometime before I started to school I had several experiences which, upon reflection, reveal that I was struggling with deep feelings of inner fear. One was at a fireworks display at Miller Park, which was five or six blocks from my house. I don't remember who took me, but I distinctly recall becoming terrified when the fireworks began to explode. I screamed and cried and had to be taken home. Another was when MawMaw took me with her to the grocery store one day when she was babysitting me. On the way home a bunch of dogs came and began barking and jumping up on me. Again, I went almost crazy with fear. I never have liked dogs since. The greatest problem occurred in the third grade when I developed a deep sense of foreboding that would not dissipate. I remember thinking that all the cars going down the street were going to go out of control, jump up on the curb, and kill me. My mother talked with the doctor about my situation, and he suggested that my imagination was too fertile and that I should quit listening to the radio. The problem eventually went away. When my tonsils were to be removed, I jumped off the operating table when a mask was placed over my nose and mouth and ran down the hall screaming.



My brother Jimmie standing on the front porch of our house at 2458 Maplewood Ave.

I went to kindergarten in a private home. The year must have been 1943. I have vague memories of being there. I remember playing "Ring around the Rosy," learning the pledge of allegiance to the flag, and having a small garden. I took great pride in my radish plants. I began first grade at Ardmore School in 1944. I would walk to school with a group of neighborhood kids, including my brother Jimmie. Others in the group included Billy Hanewinkle, Buddy Sink, and Bill Davis -- more about him later. I have very few memories of first grade except for breaking my arm. At recess we would play games like "Red Rover." There was a hedge at the edge of the playground and somehow I fell through it and broke my arm. I had to get a cast. I can also recall spending a lot of time learning to read and write. I was very proud when an example of my printing was displayed one day. It was probably in the first grade that I first demonstrated my skills as a storyteller. I was asked routinely to stand up in front of the class and tell tall tales. My favorite character was "Oscar The Worm."



Here I am with my Sunday School Class at St. Paul's Episcopal Church. I am the fellow near the left end with hair falling over his forehead.

Church was important in my upbringing. At first my family attended St. Paul's Episcopal Church on Summit Street. It is a magnificent Gothic Revival style building, and I distinctly remember going there to get confirmed and to hear Uncle Bus preach when he visited my father. My only other strong memory is attending Sunday School. Beginning about 1949 or 1950, my family began attending St. Timothy's Episcopal Church, which held its first services in the basement of a commercial building at the corner of Magnolia Ave. and Hawthorne Rd. about three blocks from my house. My brother Jimmie did not seem to enjoy church. The biggest challenge for St. Timothy's was to raise the money to build a church. Mother helped with the fundraising dinners, including cooking a whole pig on a rotisserie, to assist with this effort. To save money, church members constructed the foundation and the walls. I spent many hours at the site, especially during the summer, mixing and hauling cement to my fellow workers. I went on to become an acolyte. The minister was John Drake, a wonderful man and a good friend.

I don't want to leave the impression that I was a social recluse. I was not. I participated fully in neighborhood and school activities. I was a big talker in elementary school. I consistently received an "X" for "Avoids Unnecessary Talking and Confusion." I often engaged people in conversation so that I could win their friendship. I liked to tell jokes and make people laugh. My chums at Ardmore School included Jimmy Fordham, Terry Carriker, Donny Swing, Bobby Johnson, and Billy Taylor. I always functioned best when I could return to my home at the end of the day, however. It was when I had to interact with my peers in an environment totally separated from home that I had the greatest trouble. To this day I prefer staying close to home. I have a strong dislike for going to conventions, for example, where I have to interact with people I don't know and where I cannot return to my domicile at night. I do enjoy traveling, but either with just my wife, Mary Lynn, and family or with couples that I know and trust. But, even then, it is essential that I have a room to which Mary Lynn and I can retreat at night.

Several thoughts come to mind as I reflect upon my early childhood. My greatest problem was sustaining a sense of self worth. There's nothing unusual about that. I suppose that is why I liked to spend a lot of time by myself. I obviously found it difficult to meet the standards of traditional male behavior. Camp Hanes was a clear manifestation of that truth. I did not excel at athletics, and I did not enjoy fighting. I am sure that Bill Davis understood this aspect of my makeup. That's why he felt secure in taunting me. I did have a strong dramatic bent, as evidenced by my storytelling, my theatrical activities, and my love for singing. My home was my sanctuary. That was the one place I felt totally secure and happy. But now it was time for me to go to Reynolds High School and meet the challenges of an entirely new environment. It too is quite a story.