

About the Author

In Richardson, Texas, during the late afternoon of October 24, 1949, my mom began to have labor pains. My father rushed her to Florence Nightingale Hospital in Dallas where she checked in to the Obstetric Wing. She was whisked away to the room where she would give birth to me and my dad was told to go sit down somewhere and stay out of the way.

Back in those days, in order to get them out of everybody's hair, the fathers-to-be were relegated to a common waiting area of the OB wing. There wasn't any of that *hubby gets to watch and hold hands* business like they do nowadays.

But, at least, tucked away in their area, the men could commune with all the other prospective fathers. Like in the movies, they paced the floor and chain-smoked Lucky Strikes. After a few hours of my usual procrastination, at 10:06 pm, I made my first appearance in society. I was a chubby little baby with blue eyes and a head full of curly blonde hair. It's a good thing nobody in the family knew anything about genetics since they might have wondered how a family of brown-eyed dark-haired people came up with me. According to my eighth-grade science teacher, Mr. Anderson, both my parents apparently had *dominant brown-eyed genes*, but *recessive blue-eyed genes*. At any rate, they thought enough of me to take me home with them, and I lived there happily for the next twenty-three years. Six years after my birth, my little brother, Jonathan Mark, was born.

He had brown eyes.

We lived just north of Dallas in Richardson, Texas, where my parents literally knew everyone in town. At that time, the population there was just a few hundred decent hard-working souls.

One winter afternoon when I was about four, while my mom and dad were eating lunch with some relatives in the dining room, I was up front in the living room playing with the heater. It was the old-fashioned type with an open gas flame behind ceramic grates. That type of heater is out-lawed nowadays, but they were the norm in the South back then. I was rolling up small cigarette-sized pieces of newspaper and poking them through the grates of the stove into the flame and watching them catch fire and burn.

Somehow or other, and I don't know how, the rug caught fire. If the truth were to be known, I probably set it on fire just to see if it would burn. Sure enough, it would burn, and it did. I knew that wasn't good, so I made a few attempts to beat the flame out. Now that I'm a highly trained fire professional, I know that the flame spread rating of woolen carpet is relatively low, so I had ample time to alert the family before the house burned down. I retreated to the dining room, where my parents asked where I'd been. I fessed up, and they weren't too concerned until they smelled smoke. My dad went in and stamped the fire out with his shoe. They got a little upset about the whole affair, but not too bad. They went back to the dining room for apple dumplings

and homemade ice cream and I went outside to find another way to entertain myself. We kept that rug for several years and my mom always put an upholstered chair over the burned spot.

As the reader would suspect, I grew up to have a life-long interest in fire. To this day, Julie and I have a nice outdoor Mexican chimenea where we spend at least two or three evenings a week watching the flames and enjoying each other's company. I have my Basil Hayden bourbon and she has her very expensive fermented grape juice.

I guess I wasn't the only adventurous Everett kid who loved fire related stuff. In 1954, my older brother and my cousin sat on the porch and emptied all the powder from their 4th of July cherry bombs and M-80's into a pile. They built a super firecracker with all the powder. They took it downtown behind old Doc Mitchell's office and stuffed it into the pipe crossbar of Mrs. Johnson's clothesline pole.

When they set it off, it made a hell of a roar and shot blue flames and three generations of sparrows twenty feet out both ends of the pole. Mrs. Johnson wasn't all that happy, but nobody else seemed to care very much.

The next year, my dad got transferred to Austin, Texas. He had been working for the federal government before he went into the Army in 1944. They kept his job open for him until he returned home after the War. That was World War Two, and it was no small matter, indeed. Most people alive today don't have even a remote inkling of the horrible suffering that war caused. American civilians here at home and our fighting men abroad were greatly affected by that war. Truly, the term, "affected", doesn't even begin to describe the misery our Greatest Generation was put through.

But I digress, as they say.

My crowning achievement in our short stint in Austin was the day I decided to walk down to the shopping center to buy some candy. It was about a mile from our house. The neighbor kid wanted to go, too, so off we went. The trouble was, I was not quite five years old and the other kid was just barely four. The fact that we neglected to tell our mothers we were going played a large part in their considerable disenchantment with me. By the time we got back, all the neighbor ladies had been recruited to join in the search for us. Naturally, me being the ripe old age of five, suggested to our moms that it was all my fault. I had a few points to offer in my defense, but they fell on deaf ears. I think I had to stay in my room for a half hour or something like that.

We had lived in Austin for a year, when my mom told my dad we needed to get back to where we called home. So, he put in for the next available job opening back in the Dallas offices of General Services Administration. Soon they called and said he had a job waiting. In preparation for our homecoming, he went and put a down payment on a brand-new brick home soon to be built in Richardson. The house was several months from completion, however.

When we left Austin, with our new house far from ready, we moved onto my uncle's farm up close to Sanger, Texas, in Denton County. I completely loved the several months we spent on the farm. It was way out north of Denton, Texas, on a little gravel country road. Many years later,

the Stuckey's chain put in a store on I-35 where our little road was. The farm was 160 acres, and I was free to go anywhere on the place I wanted to go. There were barns to play in, chickens to chase, and fields to roam. All the surrounding land was large farms as well. There were very few houses to be seen.

My uncle, Marshall Marlowe Hennen, had married my mom's sister, Blanche. My mom and dad and Blanche and Marlowe had been inseparable except for the War and our time in Austin. The Hennens were making pretty good money in their plumbing business and had bought the farm, but they lived forty miles to the south in Dallas. The farm had a marvelous big old white two-story house that we lived in. Marlowe also let his parents live on the farm, much to everyone's delight. We called them Mr. and Mrs. Hennen. They lived in a small prefab house out back of the main house where we stayed. Even though my parents knew them very well, it was a standard of decorum back in those days to refer to your elders as Mr. and Mrs.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Hennen took a real shine to me, so I spent a lot of time with them. They fed me lunch frequently and told me stories while we ate. She was an old-fashioned country-style cook. We had meat and two or three vegetables and almost always something good for dessert. Everything was home-made and all the vegetables were either fresh or canned from their huge garden. Most of the meat was from pigs, calves or chickens that they raised on the farm. Mrs. Hennen had a glass eye. She told me that she had fallen into the fireplace in their family cabin when she was just a toddler and had lost her natural eye as result. I imagine that would have been around 1886 or so when she had the accident.

I had several favorite pastimes on the farm.

Helping my mom in the kitchen and visiting with the Hennens were wonderful. But the farm had a large pen with six or seven pigs in it and I spent a lot of most afternoons playing with those pigs while my mom took a nap. They loved to have their backs scratched with a rough weathered old board that had years ago, fallen off the fence. I was warned to never get in the pen with the pigs, though, unless one of the adult men-folks was with me. So, when I was by myself, I always reached through the fence to scratch them with the old board. They seemed to enjoy my company as much as I enjoyed them. Usually, Mama would send a small treat with me to feed to the pigs. It would be a cookie, a piece of bread or something of that nature. I called my mother Mama up until I was twenty years old. I called her Mom thereafter. I don't know why I changed, and I wish now I hadn't. I suppose I thought Mama sounded juvenile.

Another great pastime was riding the old John Deere tractor. I sat in Mr. Hennen's lap while he drove and of course, every now and then, he would let me steer. We plowed and mowed and sometimes cut grain. He had fashioned a vessel for his drinking water out of a gallon syrup jug. It was heavy glass with a ring at the top for your thumb or index finger when you tilted it up to take a swig. He had carefully wrapped the jug with burlap and fastened it with several wraps of smooth baling wire. Mrs. Hennen would fill his jug with water from the well and then she would soak the burlap liner with water, too. The evaporation from the wet burlap kept the water in the jug cool.

Mr. Hennen chewed Beechnut tobacco.

I liked to watch him spit a stream of brown tobacco juice at grasshoppers and such. He never spit in a cup or a nasty coke bottle like these ruffians do today. When he drank from his water jug while he was chewin' it would leave a bit of tobacco residue on the rim. Then, he would hand the jug to me and when I took a sip, I could taste it. As I write this, I can still feel the heavy jug with its wet burlap. I remember the slightly bitter-sweet taste of the Beechnut and the grown up way I felt sittin' up there with him on that old green Model B John Deere.

My mother was several months pregnant with my little brother and she would lie down and rest a little every afternoon. So, I had plenty of time to visit with Mr. and Mrs. Hennen and the pigs. Even though Mama was pregnant, she could still walk a long way. There was a really nice shady tree-lined creek about a quarter mile or so down below the hill from the house. She and I would walk down there a couple of times a week. That was where she taught me how to fish with a cane pole and a bobber. We baited our hooks with grasshoppers and other insects we found along the banks of the creek. We caught mostly small bream that she called perch, and occasionally we caught a little catfish. One glorious day, I caught a huge silvery fish. Mama didn't know what kind of fish it was, but it was big enough to eat, so we took it home. We showed it to the old folks, and Mrs. Hennen inspected it and loudly cackled it was a two-pound "crappie". She used the old country pronunciation with the "short A" sound as in "happy". After I grew up, I learned that crappie was a highly prized catch and most fishermen pronounced the "A" in crappie as a "short O" as in grasshopper. Since those days, I have owned fancy bass boats that cost five times what my dad paid for that brand new brick house in Richardson. But I'll swear right now that I've never had as much fun fishing as I did on that creek with my mother and our twenty-five cent cane poles. I don't believe I ever will, either.

Another very interesting story I heard from Mr. Hennen was that his father owned a farm in southern Denton County back in the days of Sam Bass, the famous Texas outlaw. That would have been somewhere around 1875 or so. According to Mr. Hennen, his father was a horse trader as well as a farmer. The elder Mr. Hennen was a friend of Sam Bass, and the Hennen farm was a regular stop for the outlaw gang when they were on the run. They would trade their tired horses for fresh ones. In the days of the old west, many an outlaw was apprehended because someone recognized the horse he rode. So, trading horses was a wise way to outfox the law. Sam's luck ran out, though, in Round Rock, Texas. The law caught up with him there and shot him dead on July 21, 1878. He was probably riding one of the horses he got from the Hennen place up in Denton County.

Mr. and Mrs. Hennen seemed very old to me when we lived on the farm in 1956. However, they lived another fifteen or twenty years after we left. I didn't see them much after 1963 or so. A year or so back, while doing some research on the internet, I found a photo of their tombstones and their dates of birth and death. I remember as a teenager hearing when they got sick and died but I was too busy to go to their funerals. It's too late now, but I surely wish I had gone to see them a lot more often than I did.

It was only twenty-two years after I left the Hennen farm that I first walked through the door of Plano's Central Fire Station in 1977. I was twenty-seven years old at the time.