

Highway to Hollywood

the hard way

by MAURY DEXTER

To
Emma Foster Poindexter

*The best mother and friend in the whole world. There will never be another.
I love you, Emmo.*

And

Hank Tani

*My best friend and associate for over 40 years. There will never be another.
Thank you, Tani.*

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MAURY DEXTER FILMOGRAPHY

MOTION PICTURES

ASSOCIATED PRODUCERS / 20TH CENTURY FOX

Producer	Year*
1. Little Shepherd Of Kingdom Come	1959
2. The Third Voice	1960
3. The Yellow Canary	1961

PRODUCER – DIRECTOR

4. High Powered Rifle	1960
5. Walk Tall	1960
6. Womanhunt	1961
7. The Purple Hills	1961
8. Air Patrol	1962
9. The Firebrand	1963
10. Young Guns Of Texas	1963
11. The Day Mars Invaded The Earth	1963
12. House Of The Damned	1963
13. Police Nurse	1963
14. Harbor Lights (filmed in Puerto Rico)	1964
15. The Young Swingers	1964
16. Surf Party	1964
17. Raiders From Beneath The Sea	1964
18. Wild On The Beach	1964
19. Naked Brigade (filmed in Greece)	1964
20. Outlaw Of Red River (filmed in Spain)	1965

AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL PICTURES (AIP)

Producer – Director	Year
21. Maryjane	1966
22. The Mini-Skirt Mob	1966
23. Born Wild	1967
24. Hell's Belles	1968

*May be year of production, not release.

Directed multiple episodes of *Little House On The Prairie*.

Worked as director/assistant director on over 100 episodes of *Little House On The Prairie*, 1974-1980.

Worked for five years as assistant on *Highway To Heaven* with Michael Landon, 1983 – 1990.

Directed several episodes of *Father Murphy* starring Merlen Olsen.

Assisted on TV pilot *Us* starring Michael Landon prior to his death in 1992.

CHAPTER 1

I was born in Paris, Arkansas, on June 12, 1927, the fifth child of William Henry and Emma Ellen Poindexter. I was preceded by three older brothers and a sister who, I'm told, died either very young or in childbirth. My birth name was Morris Gene Poindexter.

My oldest brother, Foster, was a good 10 years older than I and James Reed was about eight years my senior, as I recall. William Talmadge, my other brother, was three years and three months older than yours truly.

My father worked in the coalmines in Paris and my mother-nee Emma Foster, was the daughter of one of the largest mine owners in the state. My grandfather, Foster, owned the Eureka #1 and Eureka #2, as well as "The Short Mountain," all big producing mines.

Before I was born, Grandfather Foster died leaving everything to my grandmother, but leaving the financial control in the hands of his longtime employee – the controller, and his close friend – an attorney, whose names I cannot remember, as it occurred before I was born.

The story that I was told, years later, was that in a few short years – after my grandfather passed away – the controller and lawyer, through a series of maneuvering of paper work being signed by my grandmother, (who trusted these men, as her husband had for many years) was able to legally wrest the ownership of all three mines from my grandmother.

It seems almost impossible today, but I guess in the olden days – just after the turn of the century – the ladies knew nothing of business. They were strictly housewives and mothers, so it didn't take a lot of "finagling" to take away one's assets. Especially if you lived in a small town (population around 1,500) and you were the only lawyer for a hundred miles around, or so the story goes.

My father, who had worked for my grandfather Foster, had met and married my mother when she was only 17. They had their family in Paris and everything seemed fine.

However, with the loss of the mines, my father refused to work for the new crooks (owners) and moved us to Fort Smith, Arkansas – 42 miles to the northwest. Fort Smith was a pretty town, the second largest in the state, Little Rock being larger by several thousand people.

I can't recall what my father did for a living during my young years. I know we lived fairly well and had a nice two-story white house, on the edge of town. I do remember my dad seemed to be gone a lot, but was always home on the weekends. I recall vividly, him putting me on his lap and reading me the Sunday morning comics from the newspaper. We called them the "funny papers."

I remember, very well, one summer evening in July of 1935. I had just turned eight years old and was taking my bath in the upstairs bathroom at the end of the hall, when I heard the telephone ringing downstairs and then, a loud sorrowful scream! I was terrified and wanted to run downstairs for I knew the continuing screams of agony were coming from my mom. Naked and wet, I rushed to dry off and get my clothes on. It seemed like an eternity, getting out of the tub and drying off and dressing, before I could run down to the living room.

Mom stood crying, loudly, with the phone receiver dangling in her hand. My aunt had called and told her that my dad had been killed, instantly, in a head-on collision somewhere near Kilgore, Texas. I later learned he was in route to a new job in one of the new Texas oil fields.

It was the height of the Depression. My father gone and my mother (like her mother before) had no trade – never had worked a day in her life – left us entirely without means of any kind.

Foster, being the oldest, was called home from the University of Fayetteville, Arkansas. He was only in his second year, but he came home to try and find work. With thousands of men with families unemployed, the chance of a twenty year old getting anything, was all but impossible.

I remember two years before Dad died, he sent Foster some money to buy a "transportation" car to commute to the university and home. After his first term at Fayetteville, Foster drove into the rear driveway in his "transportation" car. It was a 1926-27 Lincoln convertible – complete with rumble seat and a mile-long hood. My father took one look at the huge "white elephant" and hit the roof! He scolded Foster badly and gave him a good lecture on economizing. "It takes a gallon of gas, just to go around the block!" My dad said, "Get rid of it!"

The end of the next term, Foster drove in the rear driveway – again, only this time, in a British Austen. It was so small only two could sit in it and both were cramped. I guess, to spite my dad, Foster went completely the other way. He took me for a ride and while making a turn to come back home, the steering wheel came off in Foster's hands. He put it back on the post, but the threads on the wheel itself must have been stripped

because it kept going “round and round,” but the wheels wouldn’t turn. Foster told me to hand him a pair of pliers out of the compartment. He took the pliers and clasped the post, turned the wheels and we drove home – at about 10 mph – Foster maneuvering this little car, all the way, with pliers.

After weeks at home, Foster finally got a job as stock boy at White and Castle, the largest grocery store in Fort Smith. We lived about three miles from the center of town on Johnson Street. The grocery store was at the other end of town, on Garrison Avenue, near the Arkansas River.

With four growing boys, my mom could not make ends meet on Foster’s salary which I recall was meager, to say the least. Jimmy quit school in his senior year and Foster got him a job at the grocery store – as box boy.

A year later, even with Foster and Jimmy both working, making peanuts, Mom had started selling off the furniture – piece by piece. The main trouble was that no one had any money to buy most of the articles. If slowly going to the “poor house” wasn’t bad enough, the entire family began being besieged by the unknown and, to this day, unexplained.

It seems the house was becoming, for the lack of a better word, “haunted.” The first of the “incidents” that occurred, was on a warm evening in the summer of 1936. Mom, Jimmy, Bill and I were sitting in the living room. Foster had gone out. Jimmy and Bill were reading – Mom and I were listening to the radio.

The living room had five or six concave glass-covered pictures hanging on the various walls of the room. All were early photographs of my dad’s relations and some, as I recall, of my mom’s. All of a sudden and all together – every picture came off the hook and hit the hardwood floor, face down. They, instantly, began spinning like a top, at high speed. The noise of the impact startled all of us and we jumped up and stood frozen, looking at the spinning pictures.

After they all stopped turning, my mom went over and began to survey the damage. There was none. The glass had not been broken – not even marred. Surprisingly, the wire on every frame was still intact and the hooks, on the wall, were also. It was as if the pictures, simultaneously, “jumped” off the wall hooks and fell to the floor, face down. We were too puzzled to be frightened and forgot about it, until some time later.

My mom was sitting in the dining room reading the morning paper. Bill and I were at school and Foster and Jimmy were at work. Mom said she heard the screen door, at the rear of the house, open and slam shut. She heard a woman’s high heel shoes walk across the enclosed wooden porch – heard the door open and close – heard the same footsteps

across the kitchen floor to the closed door to the dining room. The door didn't open and after a moment, mom (thinking it must be the neighbor across the street) said, "Come on in. I'm in the dining room." No response.

Mom got up – walked a few steps to the door – swung it open (expecting to see the neighbor) – no one was there! They did not have time to leave nor did Mom hear footfalls retreating. She began to get a very weird feeling about the house, although she kept her feeling to herself. A short time after that, another unexplained thing happened.

Foster was out on a date. Mom, Bill and Jim again were sitting in the living room, listening to the radio. It was probably early evening, for I had already been sent to bed, though I wasn't asleep. I slept in one of the bedrooms at the rear of the upstairs hall. There were four bedrooms upstairs. I always went to bed leaving my door ajar, until my mom went to bed.

As I was just dozing off, "all hell broke loose" – every door in the inside of the house, upstairs and downstairs, began to swing open and slam shut – not only many times, but like the pictures spinning, simultaneously. It lasted several minutes, opposed to seconds, and I was so scared! All I could do was lie there – crying.

After the noise stopped, I ran downstairs. Everyone was standing like statues in the middle of the room, in shock.

Jimmy ran across the street to the neighbors. We only had one neighbor close to us. The others were a block away. Jimmy returned with the neighbor who brought along his shotgun. He went into every room of the house – finding nothing had been disturbed. About half an hour later, with every light in every room lit, Foster came home.

We were all, including the neighbor with his gun, in the living room and Mom told Foster what had happened. Foster scoffed at the very thought of "spooks" and said, "it's very strange that all these things happen when I'm not here. I'd take care of the son-of-a-bitch, if it happened to me!"

He had no sooner uttered those words, when there was a thunderous sound of falling lumber on the large screened-in back porch. It sounded as if a large truck had unloaded a few tons of cut planks, hitting the wooden floor of the porch with a huge thud and then, the sound of planks falling – a few at a time, on the floor. We all jumped a foot and the neighbor, shotgun at the ready, ran quickly out of the living room – through the dining room and kitchen – to the rear porch. We slowly followed and looked at Foster, who was still white as a sheet.

The rear porch was in perfect order – nothing missing, nothing mused. None of us got much sleep that night. After that, the sounds became more frequent, nothing as big as the previous sounds, but always something.

The large house sat on a big corner lot and the side yard was next to the side street – which was seldom used. It had several full-grown pecan trees. I remember, so well, on the occasions when Mom was visiting my aunts and would come home in the later afternoon, my brother Bill and I would play in the yard or sit up in the pecan trees, waiting for her to come home. We would never go inside that house without my brothers or my mom. Life was bad enough for us, but “the house” was beginning to affect us all.

My Aunt Sula, Mom’s younger sister was married to a traveling salesman for Butler Bros. Co. out of St. Louis, Missouri. They had just built a large two-story brick house on 22nd street, not far from the Country Club. Sula really believed in the old time “fortune tellers,” and one in particular. An old black woman – from what they referred to in those days as – “Shanty Town.” Anyway, Aunt Sula finally persuaded Mom to go along to see this lady, one more time.

The first time she had gone, “Old Nina” – as she was called – had told Mom that Dad was going to die and that it would be a tragic death. She said it would be in a time frame that, actually, came to pass. She missed the date only by a few weeks. Obviously, mom never wanted to go back there.

Sula tells mom that “Old Nina” will have the answers to the “Haunted House.” Reluctantly, Mom went and the woman told her that the “intruder” was my father’s spirit, trying to convey something of utmost importance. Because he died so suddenly, there was something that he had not told her, and that she must now know. She said, “His is a good spirit – not an evil one – don’t block it out – face it and somehow, your late husband will get through to you. The next time it happens, says aloud, ‘What, in the name of the Lord, do you want?’”

Shortly thereafter, we lost the house to the mortgage lender. Most of the furniture was gone and we were literally on the sidewalk with only our few personal possessions. That was the end of the spooky house... never to return again.

CHAPTER 2

Prior to being evicted, Foster had heard that California was the new land of milk and honey – even the streets were paved with gold. He told Mom he was going to hitchhike out there, get rich and send for us. She strictly forbade him to leave. She had visions of him lying dead, somewhere along a highway – the same way her husband had been, a year or so before.

A few nights later, Foster packed a small bag, slipped out through his bedroom window and left a note saying, “I’ll send for you all, as soon as I get there and get a job.” My poor mother worried herself sick, over his leaving, not knowing what was to happen to him.

Jimmy got a job in an all-night service station. He worked 16 hours a day/night. Jim was only around 18 years old and he was working all those hours for... are you ready?... fifty cents (that’s 50 cents for a 16-hour shift)!

We moved to Mrs. Nelson’s rooming house, down in the old part of town. The house, like most others in the area, was a large imposing place with six or seven bedrooms. Their day had passed, but they afforded the owners some income, renting out rooms to folks like us. We had one room with a double bed and a hot plate. The four of us lived, ate and slept in that one room for months.

Bill and I walked across town to our school. Mom didn’t want us to have to get readjusted to a new school, which, she felt was inferior to the one we were attending.

With only 50 cents a day income, Mom finally buried her pride and filed for relief. That was equivalent to welfare, except for some major differences. Once a month, mom and I would walk to the train station and walk back, with our monthly supply of relief goodies. A ten pound sack of yellow flour; a five pound sack of pinto beans; a five pound slab of lard; a peck of either grapefruit or a peck of oranges – which never were in surplus that time of year; and oh, also a sack of potatoes. Needless to say, that amount of food for three growing boys and a mother was totally, inadequate. For a period of one month, I remember – so many times – I saw my mom divide the one meal a day into three and a half shares. She always took the half portion.

Many a night did this eight-year-old boy cry himself to sleep, for want of something to eat. Looking back, I know it – literally – broke my mom’s heart to see her children, slowly starving to death. How she managed to keep her health, I don’t know, for she was the most undernourished of us all.

It must have been that certain ability that only a mother possesses. That great inner strength that refuses to let her see her children suffer. I know that without the prayers that we all did daily, we would not have survived. Mom knew that the Good Lord would somehow, someday, see us through. She never lost her faith in the man upstairs. It certainly instilled in me the feeling that there is, indeed, something greater than all human kind. My faith in God has been my salvation, in all my endeavors and personal troubled times... and the good times, too.

We lived at Mrs. Nelson's rooming house for about a year. Jimmy's 50 cents-a-day/night job paid the rent, with little left over for anything else. As small as it was, the relief food, literally, saved our lives. Rarely, my Aunt Anna (Mom's older sister) would have us over for dinner. Her husband, like nearly everyone else, hadn't worked for a long time and she had three half grown children of her own to feed.

I remember a cold and wintry day. We had been out of food for a couple of days. Because it was still a week or more before the next relief train would arrive, mom was desperate. She wrote a note asking her sister Sula to please give us food to hold us over for about a week, or at least a few days.

Sula had married a fellow, years before, and had a son named Buddy. Her husband abandoned her and the boy before he was a year old. My mom and dad took her in and kept them until Sula got some kind of a job. After a few years, she met and married Glen Gullett, a successful traveling salesman for a large catalog store – like Sears – but on a smaller scale. He had saved his money and had a good (salary + commission) job, so he was living “high on the hog”, as they say in Arkansas.

After they married, they had a daughter, Barbara Ann. After her arrival, Glen built a beautiful two-story brick home near the golf course. I remember Aunt Sula saying, “The house cost \$21,000.” To all of us, they were millionaires. Anyway, the Gulletts had plenty... Sula had her own car and Buddy and Barbara had toys galore.

Mom folded the note and put it in my jacket pocket and buttoned it. She told me to go to Sula's and come straight home – for it was winter and the days were short. She didn't want me outside after dark, particularly in the sleet and on the slick streets.

At Mrs. Nelson's rooming house, we were on the other side of town from Sula's home. It must have been three miles, one way. I set out on my journey which I had done many times before. Buddy had his own room above the garage and he and I were like close brothers. He, being a year and a half older, was the leader and I went along with almost anything he wanted to do. When I arrived at Sula's, I gave her the note from Mom. She read it and told me to go play with Buddy. A few minutes later, she gave me a paper sack and told me to take it home to mom.

All the way back, I ran much of the way because I couldn't wait to have some good food – for a change. The sack seemed light in weight, but I thought that it would be something “special” because Aunt Sula had so much food in her pantry. Exhausted from running most of the way – and with great anticipation – I watched Mom open the sack. She pulled out a half loaf of bread and a half dozen eggs. My mom saw the meager amount of food and tears welled up in her eyes and she sat down, at the table – put her head in her hands and began sobbing. Knowing that after all the time that had passed – never asking for any help, from a sister who had so much – to think she sent so little.

The local bakery which was near the river – across Garrison Avenue, would sell bulk broken or chipped cookies, at five cents a pound. I had sold some Coke bottles which Buddy and I used to scour the back alleys – in Fort Smith – to find. They paid two cents a bottle at local stores. I finally got five cents and talked Mom into letting me go down to the wholesale area to buy some cookies. She finally agreed.

It was late afternoon and I walked to the factory, bought my bag of broken cookies and started home. I ate a couple, on the way, and was rushing back home to share them with the family. It was just beginning to turn dark and I was running toward Mrs. Nelson's house.

I paused at an intersection in the wholesale district and saw the streets were clear, except for a truck approaching from my right. No other vehicles – so I ran halfway into the street and stood waiting for the truck to pass me. As it did, I started to run behind the truck, for I thought it had passed me, but it had a long trailer and I ran directly into the side of the moving trailer. The impact was so great – it threw me backwards into the other lane and right on top of my cookies, which no longer were broken. They were crushed into fine bits. Thank God, there were no cars in that lane, or I wouldn't be here today. It took weeks for the bump on my head to go down.

During the summertime that year, I would walk across town to play with my cousin, Buddy. As I said, he had his own room above the garage. Buddy and his stepfather Glen disliked each other intensely. I guess Buddy resented Glen for he was a very cold and calculating type of person. He would show some affection to his daughter, Barbara, but from what I could see, none to Buddy. So, when Glen had the house built, he put Buddy in what I now realize was isolation – away from the rest of the family. The only time I remember seeing Buddy in the main part of the house was at mealtime.

Buddy and I were the very best of pals. He would like to try almost anything and generally, I would follow. Like the time he ran out of glue while building a model airplane. He and I walked into town to “buy” – according to Buddy – some more glue,

so he could finish the plane. We were at the counter at Kress', when Buddy picked up a handful of glue packets and examined each one. He, then, put the packets back on the counter, letting them fall in a heap – except for two packets, which he kept concealed in his hand. I saw what he did and was shocked and frightened at the same time. We started to leave and a man, probably the manager, yelled at us to stop. He, obviously, saw the trick that Buddy used.

We ran out the rear of the store – into the alley – with the man chasing us. We ran all the way down the alley and into an auto repair garage, where we hid – in the restroom – locking the door. Fifteen or 20 minutes later – I swear it seemed like an eternity – someone wanted to use the room. We opened the door and, looking all around, ran all the way back to Buddy's house. I never tried to steal anything, after that, in my life.

I was walking home later one afternoon from Buddy's house and I met a young girl – about my age – playing in the front of her house, about a mile from Buddy's. I stopped and we began to talk and I, for the first time in my life, fell in love. I thought she was the sweetest, prettiest young girl that I had ever seen. She had beautiful, silky dark hair and big, beautiful blue eyes. I remember being totally obsessed by her presence. Her name was Rosalie – I remember it well because that year, there was a very popular song titled "Rosalie" and I would sing it... all the way home.

I was now 10 years old and had already had my first real crush. There were times when I would pass her house, on my way home, and if she were not in the yard, I would sit on the curb – across from her house – and wait... sometimes for an hour or more, hoping she'd see me and come outside. Most of the time, it was in vain. I'm sure she didn't feel the same for me. I'll never forget Rosalie, or the times I sat on that curb to get another glimpse of that wonderful girl.

I would walk out to Buddy's several times a week in the summer of 1937. On Saturdays, when I was there, Aunt Sula would feed us lunch and I would wait while Buddy and Barbara bathed. Then, Sula would drive the three of us downtown to the New Theater – which was one of the four movie houses in town – and give Barbara and Buddy 10 cents each for the admission. After they got out, she would drive me home to Mrs. Nelson's rooming house and let me out.

To this day, I can't forgive her for that. I know, she would never miss another 10 cents so that a poor boy – in the truest sense – could have a few hours at the movies. I would cry because I didn't have the 10-cent admission. It was a cruel thing to do – to any young child – particularly to your own flesh and blood.

CHAPTER 3

Jimmy was still working 16 hours a shift, but now for 75 cents. He got a 25-cent raise because he was such a hard, honest worker.

I remember Christmas 1937. I was at Buddy's, a few days before Christmas. No one was home but him and me. He went into the hallway and pulled down the ladder that led to the attic. Once up the ladder, he came down with a package – yet unwrapped. He, carefully, opened it and exposed to most beautiful Mickey Mouse wristwatch I had ever seen. He said, "It's my Christmas present." He quickly replaced it. For the next few days, before Christmas, I was begging for a watch like Buddy's. Even though I know that it was virtually impossible for me to get a watch that costs \$3, when we still didn't have that much to eat. Still, I remember crying, pleading, begging for a watch at Christmas. Mom explained, over and over, that it was impossible!

Finally, Jimmy, our only source of income, told me to stop whimpering and be thankful for what I had – at least we would have a Christmas dinner, thanks to his raise. On Christmas Eve, I went to bed crying and praying for that watch. Jimmy left for his night/day shift and said, when he came home in the morning, Christmas day, I had better shape myself up... period!

I remember waking up Christmas morning, still teary-eyed from crying during the night. Mom and Bill were already up and to me, it was just another miserable morning. But, I had stopped crying – for Jimmy's words the night before had finally gotten through to me. A short time later, Jimmy came home to that one room where we all were. He walked over to me and said, "Look what Santa left at the gas station for you." He handed me a small, neatly-wrapped Christmas package – which I hurriedly opened, and to my amazement... there was a MICKEY MOUSE WRISTWATCH!!! – just like Buddy's. I really cried with joy! Mom started to cry, then Bill and finally, Jimmy. We all hugged each other and – to this day – it was the most glorious Christmas I have ever had.

I found out, later, that Jimmy had agreed to work on his days off for the extra \$3 or so. (They advanced him the money because it was Christmas). I will never forget his love and charity for even though we were still barely getting by with our living, it was more important to him to please a young, deprived boy of something he wanted, so desperately – than to buy himself, or even my mom or my brother Bill each a small gift. Jimmy was, for the next five years, more than a brother. He became my father – in so many ways.

During these past two years, my mom continued to try and find work. As I said, she had no experience, other than being a housewife, so it was impossible to find anything. She, finally, was able to “take in” ironing from some neighbors. She couldn’t do the washing because she would have had to pay extra for the water, soap, etc. – she would have lost money. Being that we were living in a rooming house, the roomers generally had the clothes line filled –most of the time. She made some kind of a deal with Mrs. Nelson for the extra hot plate usage. She used flat irons, which had to be heated on the unit – that burned gas.

CHAPTER 4

Early in 1938, Jimmy, still driving an old model car – I think it was a 1930 Chevy – decided that he and Bill would drive to California and try to find Foster. Upon finding jobs, they were to send for us. Bill quit school – totally against Mom’s wishes – but at that time, she was at her wits’ end, literally. The boys had the car, but no money for food or gas.

In those days, if you wanted to go to California from Arkansas or Oklahoma or Texas, there were four ways of getting there: hitchhike, take a bus, take the train or “share a ride”. Flying, of course, was out of the question. Many men with cars in those days – like Jimmy and Bill – had the car, but no funds. They ran ads in the local newspaper, selling a seat to California – for anywhere from \$10 to whatever the traffic would allow. Entire families came to California like that. If the family – of say, four or six – had the money, they would split up and leave, whenever they could get seats. Seats were somewhat at a premium in those days. Jimmy ran the ad and in no time, he had a car full and headed to California, to find the “pot at the end of the rainbow.”

He had four passengers (at \$15 each) which was enough to buy gas and food for he and Bill – and a little to live on – until they were able to find work. He also left Mom with \$20, as I recall, which would pay our one-room rent for several weeks and some money for food. Seems impossible now, but – in those days – a \$20 bill was like a blessing from heaven.

Jimmy’s first task, when arriving in Los Angeles, was to try and locate Foster. If you’re wondering what happened to Foster, after over a year in California... so were we. After a few weeks in California, Foster sent a picture postcard. The picture was of him sitting in front of a huge orange colored moon, with palm trees in the back of him. He just wrote that he “was fine and had a job – love to all.” No return address – nothing! Only later, did I realize California didn’t always have huge orange colored moons... it was a backdrop at Santa Monica Pier. Anyway, we would hear from him, once in a “blue moon.” We never knew anything about him or what he was doing – his work – nothing.

When Jimmy and Bill arrived in Los Angeles, Jimmy got a job in a small soda fountain shop in Bell – a small town south of L.A. – jerking sodas. It only paid about \$15 a week, but the owner gave Jim and Bill a room, free, and also gave them both their meals – twice a day. Man, they were living! Jimmy kept reading the want ads every Sunday and finally applied at Angeles Furniture Co. in east L.A. He got the job as broom boy. It was his job to sweep up and clean all of the sawdust and wood scraps from around the equipment, as the men continued to operate the many machines.

When he told the owner of the shop why he had to have a higher paying job – namely, his mother and younger brother who were waiting to come and join him – the owner, not only gave Jimmy his blessing, but said that Bill could take his old job. A few months later, Jimmy was promoted to carpenter’s helper, with a raise. He also was able to get Bill – once again – his old job, sweeping up. Less than a year after arriving in Los Angeles, Jimmy and Bill had saved enough money to send for Mom and me. They also had been sending small amounts of money each month, to pay our rent and food bill.

Getting back to Foster – when the boys first arrived in L.A., they checked the L.A. phone directory and, sure enough, there was a Foster Poindexter listed. Jimmy called him immediately and Foster came. It seems that he had arrived in town a year earlier and had gotten a job with J.E. Coberly – the largest Ford new car dealership in L.A. His job was helping to put a polish/wax on each new car, to protect the finish. This cost, of course, was passed on to the consumer. As I recall, there were about six or eight lack men (plus Foster) doing the polishing. After a few weeks, Foster approached the manager and proposed to contract the labor – rather than pay each man an hourly wage. He bought it and, although I have no idea how he worked it out, less than a year later, he was contractor/boss of all the black crew. He was making a \$100.00 a week, married, and living at one of L.A.’s best places – The California Hotel.

Now (1937-38) the average weekly pay, even in Los Angeles was around \$20-\$25 a week. Foster’s was around \$100 a week. HE NEVER SENT A DOLLAR HOME, WHEN WE WERE STARVING – never told us that he was married – never offered money or helped find employment for Bill or Jim – didn’t even want his brothers to meet his wife, Jeanne. We found out later that he was probably ashamed of his poor “Arkie family.”

I don’t know how Mom ever forgave him – even after he divorced Jeanne and came to live with us, with his “Tail between his legs.” Thinking back to those days, I’m not sure that I have really forgiven him myself.

Jimmy wired the money for Mom and I to go to California. Mom saw an ad for two seats available in “Share a Ride” to California and promptly made arrangements to leave. The car owner/driver was an older man named Mr. Dickie. Mom later referred to him only as “old man Dickie” – and for good reason. We only had enough money for food for the two of us for the three-day trip.

After paying for the transportation, old man Dickie had three more paying customers besides the two of us. One was a young man, in his early 30s, and he had paid only half price because he was supposed to drive 50 percent of the time. Old man Dickie said he would drive 12 hours of daylight and the young man would drive the 12 hours

at nighttime. It was my understanding that, at that rate, we would be arriving in Los Angeles in a little over three days.

We left Fort Smith, with old man Dickie driving, and got to Tulsa, Oklahoma, several hours later. Old man Dickie stopped for “supper,” as they called dinner in those days. After supper, the old man stopped at a row of cabins along Highway 66. The cabins were the forerunners of motels. He said he was tired and refused to let the younger man drive. So, he parked the car and checked into a cabin for the night. None of us had money for a cabin, so we slept in the car, until the next morning.

This stubborn old cuss would only drive a few hundred miles a day and stop every night to get himself a cabin. Instead of a three-day trip, it took us six days and by the fourth day, Mom ran out of money, so for the last two days and nights, we had nothing to eat. That didn’t affect old man Dickie. He still stopped twice a day for lunch and dinner, went to a cabin, got up every morning, ate his breakfast and completely ignored our situation.

It was summer and driving across the New Mexico and Arizona deserts in the daytime was pure madness! Because he would only drive during the daylight hours and refused to let the young man drive at night, we hit the deserts in full daylight. Those old cars had no air conditioning and with five adults and a 10-year-old boy – plus our personal effects – that car was loaded to the gills.

I thought we would surely die of heat exhaustion, driving across the flat, arid desert (for three days) with the temperature well over a 100 degrees each day. The sun shining through the windshield, hitting the wooden steering wheel, made it impossible to hold onto. They would buy 10 cents worth of ice, put it in a bucket with water, soak a piece of cloth until it was cold and wrap the cloth around the steering wheel so as not to burn the driver’s hands. I thought we would never reach California.

Finally, late one day, we arrived at the “port of entry.” A dry riverbed divided Arizona from California and across the long, narrow bridge was a sign reading, “All vehicles stop for inspection.” There were several uniformed state employees at the station and they would check every vehicle from stem to stern, including all suitcases or packages that were in the cars or trucks. They were looking for any kind of fresh fruits or vegetables. If any were found, they could not enter the state of California.

By the time we arrived in Los Angeles, Jimmy and Bill were crazy with worry... for we were three days late! They thought the worst had happened to us. We were hot, thirsty and hungry but thank God, we were okay.

Jimmy had rented a small house on a hillside in Highland Park – about a 30-minute drive from Downtown L.A. The house sat high above the street and there must have been a hundred steep steps, leading from the street to the house. We had a very nice, furnished rental house to live in for the first time in over two years. I was enrolled in school in Highland Park and, for a time, life seemed good again.

CHAPTER 5

When my father was killed, in July of 1935, it was just short of his 42nd birthday. He and several other men were headed for an oil field somewhere in Texas. My dad and another man were seated in the cab of a truck alongside the driver. There were, as I recall hearing, a couple of other men in the back of the truck. As the truck was traveling up a long hill, it curved at the top where a loaded oil tanker truck was coming down the road. At great speed, and from the opposite direction, the oil truck crossed the center line of the two-lane highway and smashed into the truck carrying my father, head on.

I remember hearing all the stories about the crash for weeks afterward. The coroner said that Dad, the driver, and the other passengers died instantly. “They never know what hit them.” I don’t know what happened to the men in the back of the truck. It was nighttime and no one witnessed the horrible accident.

My mother, a few months later, at the insistence of family and friends, hired an attorney to investigate the death on a “if we win, we get paid” deal. It was the law firm of Theon and Agee (I’m not sure of the spelling, for as young as I was, I just heard the names for a long time). Anyway, the attorneys had been putting the case against the oil company together for nearly two years and said they had a very strong case. They filed the case seeking hundreds of thousands of dollars against the oil company – whose name, I believe, was Continental Oil of Texas.

Twenty-four hours after the suit was filed, the oil company filed for bankruptcy. We later found out, they continued to do business under a different name. The case took about two years before it got to trial. Mom was notified that she would have to appear (for some reason that I don’t recall). She had to be in Texarkana, Texas, on a certain date. We had been in California for only a short time.

The attorneys had proven that the truck crossed the center line, at a speed far in excess of the speed limit. The tanker driver had stopped for “supper” several miles back from the accident site and the waiter at the café stated that the driver had consumed enough beer to make him an unsafe driver – particularly of a vehicle the weight and size of that tanker truck. In his opinion, it looked like an open-and-shut case.

Mom and I took the train back to Arkansas, but not to Fort Smith. She had an aunt whose name was Ead – short for Edith, I’m sure. She lived with her husband, Fernando Butler (not related to the Butler Bros. that Glen Gullett worked for) on a 40-acre farm, about three miles outside of Paris, Arkansas, where we were all from originally. I stayed on the farm while Mom went to Texarkana to do whatever she had to do before the

trial started. She returned in a few days to the farm and we waited to hear news of a trial date.

Weeks went by, then months. They would set a date and the oil company would get a postponement. Mom and I stayed for over a year, waiting for the trial date.

I had turned 11 years old and I was the loneliest 11-year-old in the world... or so I thought.

Uncle Fernando was a large man and worked his farm like a horse. Aunt Ead (I called them Aunt and Uncle even though they were, technically, my Great Aunt and Uncle) was a small, thin woman of no more than 90 pounds. Actually, she was all skin and bones – the very opposite of her husband. Aunt Ead had something wrong with her pancreas. I understand that she had that problem for many years. The only food she consumed was toast, soaked in milk – three times a day. It always amazed me how strong she was, in spite of her diet.

Uncle Fernando and Aunt Ead would rise, every morning, at five. She would start the huge wood-burning stove in the large kitchen and begin preparing breakfast. The typical breakfast consisted of the following: large steaks or pork chops, homemade large buttermilk biscuits, fried or mashed potatoes and a skillet full of country gravy. After breakfast, generally around 6:00 am, Uncle Fernando would hitch up his team of horses or mules – depending on what had to be done that day – and leave for the fields.

Many days, I saw him plow acre after acre, from sun up to sundown. I used to take him his lunch, wherever he was working on the 40-acre farm. Aunt Ead would fix a humongous lunch and pack it in a basket. He would take just enough time to consume it and back to work . . . until the sun set.

For that one year or so, I had no schooling. We were three miles from town and the nearest school – which was not open. Uncle Fernando had an old model “T” Ford, but he would use it only about once a month to go into town for supplies – which were few. He grew just about everything you wanted to eat. His crops consisted of corn and cotton, primarily which were for marketing. However, he raised every conceivable vegetable one could think of. Also, there were peach, cherry, persimmon and apple trees, and in the summer, watermelon and cantaloupes. He had two huge high sided wagons and when the “crop was in” – be it cotton or corn – he would load up those big wagons, hitch up the mules and drive them three miles to town.

Paris had a large cotton gin mill and I used to help unload the cotton from the wagons. I remember, like it was yesterday, the first and only time that I picked cotton. Uncle paid 10 cents a pound and people came from neighboring farms to pick. I wanted to

make some money, so I volunteered. He gave me a sack about 30 inches round and about six feet long. It was a long, round burlap bag with a strap that went over your shoulder and around your neck. You pulled it along the rows of cotton plants as you picked it from the bowl – which when mature, opened up much like a tulip with the cotton pushed partially out.

The bowl, however, had sharp points – needle sharp – and if you didn't get your fingers inside the opening, you would prick your fingers until they bled – which I did over and over. By the time I had reached the end of the first day, my hands were sore and bleeding. I had picked, maybe, several pounds. The strap around my neck, from pulling the weight of the bag, was choking me and my knees were getting raw from the hard, dry ground. My uncle came by, looked down and reminded me, “the buyers prefer white cotton, not red.” My fingers were bleeding so much that I was pre-dyeing the cotton. I think I made about a dollar and vowed, then and there, that I would do almost anything to make a living – but I would never, ever, ever, pick cotton... as long as I lived.

It was a very lonely time for me. My uncle had a few sharecropping families on the farm, but the children were either too young or too old to play with. I would cut myself a “stick horse” – a long branch from a tree – tie some string around the tip of it, for a bridle, put it between my legs and run throughout the area pretending to be Buck Jones – for he was my favorite cowboy actor.

There was a small creek that ran through the rear of uncle's farm. It was about 25 feet wide and six feet deep. I never knew the source of the creek – maybe a spring – for it was always crystal clear and cool. In the summertime, I spent many hours in that cool creek. The farmhouse was a large one-story building, with a big living room, a fireplace, dining room, three or four bedrooms, but no baths. There was only the “outdoor privy.” I recall it was a three-holer.

The winter that we were there was severe. I don't remember ever being so cold! There was no heat, except for the fireplace in the living room and the large wood-burning kitchen stove. The four of us lived all winter long in the kitchen where Aunt Ead kept the stove burning all day and most of the night. They hung a large quilt, on a wire, in the corner of the kitchen and brought inside a very large galvanized tub. Mom would heat water from the hand pump in several buckets on the stove and pour each of us a hot bath. Uncle was always first, for as soon as he came in from the fields, he had to have his hot water ready. He was always dirty and would hardly look at us until he had cleaned up.

I remember that winter. Mom and I had the bedroom at the end of the hall and each night, before bed time, Mom would fill four hot water bottles with boiling water and place two on the side of my bed and two on hers, between the sheets. By the time we would retire, the cold sheets were warm as toast. We slept on a feather bed with a mattress so filled with down that you would sink into it and it would come up around your body like a loose glove.

As I said, those were lonely days for me. Occasionally I would walk up to the end of the dirt road above the farmhouse, to a small coal mine. I would stand by the entrance and watch the miners come out of the “hole in the ground.” They all looked the same – same dirty black clothes, their faces completely black, except for the white band around their eyes, where their goggles had been. They each had a black cap that held a carbolic lamp on the brim. I remember seeing a picture of Dad with some other miners, when I was small. I couldn’t tell him from the others. As I watched, I would try to pick my father out of the group of men. I recall that Dad was tall so I only looked at the tall men, as they passed me.

When Dad was killed, he was horribly disfigured. In those days, funeral workers had very little expertise in reconstructing someone with such drastic damage to the body and, particularly, the face. Unfortunately, the tradition was to have an open casket at one’s funeral. The mortician did an excellent job, cosmetically, but to this day, the body in that casket was not that of my father. He looked like someone entirely different.

Because he had died hundreds of miles away from home – plus the delay of transportation – the technicians had to use an overwhelming amount of embalming fluid, and the odor was so foreign and strong to me, I became sick to my stomach. I am totally against open-casket funerals.

The first identification of my dad, at the accident site, was his hand-written name and address – folded into the lining of his hat. For some reason, they never found his wallet, or anything else that could identify him. So, when I saw him lying in the casket, I knew that his hat had blown off near the accident, and he was still alive . . . somewhere. I believed that for several years.

Even in those terrible, trying days at Mrs. Nelson’s rooming house, I would go to sleep knowing that Dad would be back to take care of us.

It was like the sound of the telephone, the night that my mom got word of Dad’s death. For many years, even into my 30s – if I was in the shower or bath and the phone rang, I would automatically jump. I always felt it would be terrible news, as it had been on that July evening – back in 1935 when I was a little boy.

Other than riding my “stick horse” all over the farm and swimming in the creek, I would rarely be allowed to walk the three miles into Paris. We had some relatives there, mainly on my father’s side. He came from a family of 10 (eight boys and two girls). Only Uncle Carl, of all the brothers, lived there with his family of five children. His two sisters were living there with their families, also. I would walk to town and I tell you, those three miles always seemed like 30 miles to my little feet and legs. I would spend a few days with some of my cousins and make the long walk back to the farm.

I recall, one Saturday morning, Uncle Fernando was to drive into town for his monthly supplies. Mom decided that she and I would go and spend a few days with my Uncle Carl. Fernando went into the small barn – took the cover off the Model T and set the choke and the spark, which were on the steering column under the wheel. He took the crank and inserted it in the hole in front and below the radiator. He told me to sit in the driver’s seat and when he turned the crank enough times – to turn over the engine – for me to pull up on the choke to keep the engine from dying. I felt 10 feet tall and 20 years old!... I was helping to start a car!

We arrived at Uncle Carl’s house about a mile from town. It was a small house with only two bedrooms, so Uncle Carl slept in the living room on the floor, while Aunt Bess and Mom shared the one bedroom. The five cousins and I shared the other bedroom – four in the bed and two on “pallets” (a couple of quilts) on the floor.

Bobby, one of my cousins, had a job on Saturday nights at the only movie theatre in town. He would sell popcorn by walking up and down the aisles – even during the movie – as well as intermission. The pay was a free movie plus 25 cents for the night. It just so happened that that weekend we were there, Bobby got sick and couldn’t go. His brothers, Gordon and Duval, didn’t want the job, so... I volunteered.

I got to the theater early, having walked the train tracks for the mile into town. The manager/owner gave me the popcorn tray – a flat container with a strap that went around your neck to hold it – not unlike the bottom of an 18 x 24 box, with the sides cut off. The tray held about 15 sacks of popcorn. I filled the sacks from the popper in the lobby and as the movie started, I began my first job since picking cotton. As I moved down the aisle, selling a couple of sacks of corn, the movie title came on the big screen – *A Star Is Born*, starring Fredric March and Janet Gaynor.

It was the summer of 1937... I moved down the right aisle, across the center seating section and back up the left aisle. Nobody was buying popcorn! I went into the lobby and replaced the few sacks that I had sold and returned to the right aisle, again. About halfway down the aisle, I started watching the movie. Finally, I stopped, sat down in the aisle and became mesmerized by the glamour and drama of the film.

I remember well the ending – when Norman Maine, the actor, walked into the ocean, at night, in Santa Monica, California. The movie ended and I was still sitting in the middle of the aisle as the intermission lights came on. The people began stepping around me to go out into the lobby. I slowly rose, still seeing Fredric March – walking into the surf. When I “came to,” I realized that not only had I sat through the entire movie, I also had eaten most of the popcorn! Woe was me! I received a tongue lashing from the manager, poor Bobby lost his Saturday night job, and I lost the friendship of my cousin – for a short time.

Bobby refused to tell Mom what happened for he knew that I would get the “lickin” of my life. However, the die was cast. Sitting in the aisle of that small movie theater that Saturday night and watching that great motion picture, instilled in me the burning desire to be involved in the movies.

As the year ended, the lawsuit finally came to trial. Mom went back to Texarkana for the duration and came back, with just enough money to pay for my dad’s funeral – which was two years later. Friends said that the lawyers got paid off and Mom got nothing! The time we spent on the farm was lonely, but healthy. We had every kind of wonderful homegrown, homemade food. Mom wrote Jim and Bill to send some money for our return and Jim wrote back that he would “wire” the money, in a few days. A few days passed – then a few more. Nearly two weeks went by, and still no money. The farm had no phone, and for that matter, none of our relatives did, either. Bill and Jim didn’t have one either, so it was virtually impossible to make contact, except by mail. In those days, it took a week or more to get a letter from the West Coast.

After nearly three weeks of waiting, Uncle Fernando drove Mom into Paris and to the local telegraph office. When she inquired about the money, the manager said that the money was received over two weeks ago and was sent out to her at the farm. Mom and Uncle Fernando stated that no money ever came to his place. The manager sent for the messenger boy and confronted him, with the facts. The boy broke down and admitted that he had taken the money because some of his family were ill and needed the money badly.

The young man was only 16 years old and he cried, until I thought his heart would break. The manager was going to call the sheriff and press charges, but Mom refused, saying under different circumstances, this could be one of her own sons. The boy still had about half of the money hidden, so he returned that and Jimmy sent us the rest so we could, finally, return to California.

CHAPTER 6

I remember the train ride from Paris, Arkansas, to Los Angeles, California. Mom and I didn't have Pullman's, but seats were overstuffed and comfortable. I couldn't wait to go into the dining car and order a meal. I recall the tables were covered with a white cloth and the glassware looked like crystal – although I'm sure it was a low grade. The silverware shone like a newly-minted penny.

After all the time being isolated from some of the more pleasant things in life, this was really a treat for me. Sitting at the table and watching the countryside go whizzing by was exhilarating to me – for this was no “Old Man Dickie” transportation, but heaven on steel tracks. I would fall asleep in the seat, with my head resting against my mom's shoulder and dream of the California that I had seen so little of and had taken so for granted. Now, I know that my life would really begin to take shape because Los Angeles was going to be the answer to this kid's prayers.

Arriving in L.A. – at Union Station – early one morning, I awakened in time to see the city's landscape for the first time. The few months living in Highland Park, I don't recall ever going to downtown Los Angeles. Jimmy and Bill met us at the station and there were tears of joy all around. We took the short drive across the city and through the Third Street tunnel, crossed Figueroa and continued up Third Street, to the top of a pretty good grade and turned into a side street named Hartford Terrace. The boys had rented a cottage in the rear of a large three-story framed apartment house. There were two rows of cottages with a common walkway in front. There were four altogether, two on either side. Each unit had their own front and rear entrances, but were connected in the middle. The time from 1938 until we moved in 1941 were some of the happiest days for me.

Foster had remarried and lived in L.A., but we seldom saw him. We were there for weeks before we met his new wife. I guess it was still the “Arkie Syndrome.” It took him years to get over it. He had a terrific job. He was salesperson and display man for the Philip Morris Tobacco Co. He had his own new paneled truck and traveled from L.A. to San Diego, delivering merchandise to the many drug stores, markets and any other place that sold Philip Morris products.

During the late 30s, Philip Morris had a spokesman, a midget named Johnny. He wore the costume of a hotel pageboy, with the flat hat and all. Foster would take him on his route – sometimes to plug the product. Philip Morris had a radio show in which Johnny always did the introduction: “This is Johnny, stepping out of thousands of store windows and counters all over the country, to bring you *The Philip Morris Program.*” Nearly every store had either pictures or cardboard cutouts of Johnny on display.

I recall the rent on our cottage was \$25 a month. Jimmy would drive us to Grand Central Station on the corner of Third and Hill Street every Saturday. Mom would buy sack after sack of groceries. I remember we hardly could make room for all of the food in the trunk of the old Chevy. (The total cost was about \$5). The boys were still driving the car that we all thought wouldn't get them to California, nearly one and a half years ago. Anyway, at the huge supermarket, bread was 10 cents a loaf, a dozen sweet navel oranges were five cents and other foods were similarly priced.

The Depression was still in force, but in California, you'd never know it. There were jobs – for those who really wanted to work – and the pay was darn good, too.

In the year we were back in Arkansas, Jimmy had learned his trade in the furniture factory and got a much better paying job – building travel trailers over in Eagle Rock. In a short time he was made assistant foreman and sent for Bill to join him. Jimmy was making about \$30 a week and Bill now with his new job, was making around \$15. \$45 dollars a week, in 1938, was good money.

Mom decided, after about a year, that we could afford a “new used” car. They shopped around and because the old Chevy had been such a good car – and it was still running – that the newer car should be a Chevrolet. They, finally, bought a used 1939 – two-door deluxe Chevy. The total price was \$750. It was only a few months old and had very little mileage. Those were the days!! Plenty to eat, a “new” car, a clean, neat, small house and good health all around, but paradise does have its glitches.

CHAPTER 7

I couldn't wait to get back to school after missing one whole year. I was enrolled at Fremont grade school, at the bottom of Third Street and Fremont Avenue. They put me back a year to make up the grades that I had missed, but in a few weeks they put me in my normal grade level. It seems that the Arkansas educational system was way more advanced than California's. Even after losing a whole year, I was still on the same academic grade level, as I would have been without missing the year of schooling.

That one year, in the sixth grade at Fremont, was sheer joy for me. On May Day, our homeroom teacher, Mr. McCann, decided we were going to have a parade around the school yard. To begin the festivities, he got the young band member together and asked me if I would be the drum major. I didn't hesitate and said, "Yes!" – for I knew it was a chance to dress up in my new suit.

We didn't have a baton, so Mr. McCann brought a plumber's helper (a plunger) from home and he made the half round head of the plunger solid, so we had a round-headed baton. I went to the school garden and picked a beautiful carnation from the bunch and put it in my lapel, like I had seen in the movies. The scent of the carnation was so sweet and so great smelling that for years – when I would smell that fragrance – I would feel the warmth and joy of that day, when I was enjoying life so much.

I lead the little "put-together band" around the yard several times and we were a great success. I had no idea what I was doing... I just pushed that plunger up and down, like I'd seen them do in the movies.

The next year, I went to Central Junior High School which was closer to downtown L.A. Situated on Hill Street, Central Junior High was primarily a minority school. I was one of the few blond-haired, blue eyed white kids in the school. There were about 80% Mexican Americans, 15% Oriental and the remainder were Caucasian.

The time was 1939-1940. The Mexicans formed gangs known as Pachoucos. (They were the originators of the Zoot Suit). The Mexican boys decided they didn't like me because I looked much too different from them *and* the Mexican girls would flirt with me – for that reason.

From nearly the first day in that school, the Mexican boys would be waiting for me, after school and off the school grounds, and every day they would beat on me.

I never told my family the first year, because I was ashamed that I couldn't take care of myself. The second year, the gangs became stronger and there were small riots in East L.A. between some gangs and the police. These were only Junior High School gangs,

but most of their older brothers or relatives were causing all the trouble and these guys were trying to emulate the big boys. The second year was terrible for me.

There was one boy, a big Mexican kid named Andrew Soto. He was the gang leader and loved to see me being bounced off a wall or the sidewalk by his six- or seven-member gang. Finally, I came home one day so beat up, with clothes torn so badly, I could no longer keep the secret. When Mom and Jimmy found out what had been going on, they hit the ceiling!

They both went to see the principal and demanded the beatings be stopped. He was very concerned, but stated that anything occurring outside the school property was beyond his control. We lived just two blocks outside of the “white school district” and consequently, I had to walk nearly two miles to go to a predominantly non-white school.

Jimmy contacted the Board of Education to try and get me transferred to the other school – citing the trouble that I was having, only because I was white. The Board refused to give me a transfer. It was then that Mom and Jimmy decided, “We’re moving to a civilized community.”

During the four years in L.A., except for the problems with the gangs, I really loved the area. We were in a nice neighborhood and still only 15-20 minutes to downtown L.A. by streetcar. There were at least eight to nine first-run movie theaters in town. I was in them a lot of the time during the summer vacation and every weekend.

I remember the Orpheum Theater on Broadway, near Ninth Street. They would show a first-run major film and then have a big name band. After intermission, I saw – to name a few – Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Benny Goodman. Then there was the Hippodrome over on Spring Street. It was an old time Vaudeville House and, even as late as 1939 to 1941, they would still show a movie and present some vaudeville acts, as well. The Million Dollar Theater at Third and Broadway was one of my favorites. They still showed some Westerns and serials.

When we returned to L.A. in 1939, I would always go to the market every Saturday with Mom and Jimmy. I remember seeing a fruit that was totally foreign to me. It really intrigued me and I kept asking for them to buy me one. Jimmy kept refusing, saying, “you won’t like it and it’s too expensive!” (It cost about 25 cents). Like the watch, a few years earlier, I kept begging for the fruit. It was a pomegranate. Jimmy said, “Spend your own money because I know you will not eat it.”

It was the time of the Big Bands. Bill was totally into the “Swing Era.” He bought nearly every new record that came out. He had a terrific selection of all the top bands of the

time. He guarded his collection with great care. I was not to touch them. The old 78's were wax and easily prone to scratching, or worse, breaking. Since I had left the band around the schoolyard – for May Day – I was sure that I was going to be a Big Band leader. The acting was put on hold – for now.

When Bill would go out at night, I would go into his bedroom, carefully select a few records of the day – such as Glenn Miller, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Artie Shaw, Benny Goodman, etc. – open his closet and take out his wind-up record player and silently steal away to the rear of the cottages. Once there, I would wind up the player, put on the record, and with a small twig from one of the nearby trees, I would take my “baton” and for a couple of hours, would be on the band stand, at the L.A. Orpheum or the Hollywood Palladium – leading all of the Big Bands. I must have looked foolish standing there in the moonlight waving my arms to the rhythm of the music – record after record – but for me, it was pure enjoyment.

One night, Jimmy decided to go downtown to a movie. Bill had the car out on a date. Mom and I stayed home, for it was a school night. So, Jimmy took the streetcar straight down Third Street, for a brief ride and walked up Broadway to the theater of his choice. After the movie was over, about 10:30 pm, Jimmy began walking back toward Third Street to catch the streetcar home. A couple of blocks from the theater, he was “accosted” by two men in business suits and instantly handcuffed, put into a car and taken to the police station. He couldn't get any information from the police as to his arrest and they didn't let him make his legal “one call” to home. He was then put into the “lineup” with a few other men and then released. The witness, as it turned out, picked one of the other men as an individual who had earlier robbed his shop. The police apologized and drove Jimmy home in a squad car. Mom said, “Thank heaven, it was night time. Can you imagine what the neighbors would have thought if they dropped you off in the daytime?” It took days for Jimmy to get over his ordeal.

As I said, those years – 1939 through 1941 – were except for the school gang problem, really great for me. Los Angeles, in those days, had crystal clear skies. With no smog and no congestion, the overall weather was truly heavenly. After Mom and Jim confronted the school principal, to no avail, it was decided that we were going to move out of the area. In three years, Mom had saved enough to buy the car and now, had enough money for a down payment on a new home – way out in the sticks... a little town named Burbank. As badly as I hated the beatings, I didn't want to move out to the middle of nowhere.

A few months before we moved, Jimmy sat me down and had a “father-son” discussion about the gang situation. He said, “The only way to win in a seemingly ‘no-win

situation' was to use 'an equalizer' - anything that would help even up the odds." He wasn't advocating violence, but rather, "fighting fire with fire." A short time later, I was on my way home from school and just like clockwork, Andrew Soto and his gang of six or so were waiting for me.

At that time, there was an apartment house being erected nearby, so I made a mad dash for the structure. The building was completely framed in and I ran inside, trying to hide. Once inside, I saw that the place was like a skeleton and there was no place to hide. I stood there, anticipating another beating as the gang moved slowly, but surely, toward me.

The leader, Soto, walked up to me and drew his fist back – as he had done on many earlier occasions. Only this time, I looked down at the concrete floor of the building and realized that I was standing near a pile of scrap two-by-fours. Without hesitation, I grabbed the biggest piece I could get – about three feet long – and weighed into Soto. He was so startled that he ran back to the group who were standing, watching with mouths agape. I moved quickly into the entire group, swinging the "club" wildly, in every direction. I continued battering each one until they broke and started running away. I actually chased them a few yards yelling, "NEXT TIME, I'LL KILL ALL OF YOU!!"

That was on a Friday and the weekend was torture for me because I knew that come Monday afternoon, I was all but dead. Early Sunday evening, I pretended that I was getting sick. Mom took my temperature and said that I had none. I went to bed praying that I would get sick – before the sun came up. I thought, if a day passed, the gang might forget or, at least, not try to kill me.

Monday morning came and I was off to school, reluctantly, to say the least. I saw Soto and most of his boys during the day at school – nothing seemed amiss. No words, no staring from any of them – nothing!! After the lunch break, I decided to go to the nurse to say I was really sick so I would get to go home early, thus missing the inevitable confrontation. I raised my hand, told my teacher that I wasn't feeling good and could I please go see the nurse? My teacher, Miss Edith King, told me to go.

As I walked down the deserted school hallway, I saw the boy's restroom and went inside. I stood there – it seemed an eternity – trying to force myself to go to the nurse's office, but common sense kept prevailing. If not today... tomorrow... might as well get it over with. I returned to my class and told the teacher that I felt better and would stay until the end of the day.

I held my breath, all the way home. Not a sign of Andrew Soto or his gang! I thought, what an idiot I had been! I should have used that tactic two years before! Looking back, however, I guess I was just lucky because about a year later, while living in Burbank, I read in the *L.A. Examiner* newspaper that Andrew Soto was arrested and held for murdering a rival Pachouco gang member.

CHAPTER 8

Shortly before we moved, it was a Sunday morning and I had taken the streetcar – plus a couple of transfers – out to Uncle Carl’s house. He and his family had moved to California about a year before. He lived out in southeast L.A. on South Maple Street. Anyway, I recall getting off the streetcar and walking to his house. The entire family was sitting or standing around the radio, listening to the news that Pearl Harbor had been attacked a few hours earlier. Shortly after, Foster was drafted.

We moved into our new and wonderful home in Burbank. The home was located out on Glenoaks Boulevard, about a mile and a half from the town itself. I remember, it was that far from the end of the streetcar line. The house was brand new – with two bedrooms, a living room, dining room, kitchen, small porch and one bathroom. Mom and I shared one bedroom – with separate beds – and Jim and Bill shared the other. This was a new development of homes, about 40 or 50. The price was \$5,500. Mom put down the down-payment of around \$750 and the payments were something like \$40 per month.

Mom also bought a house full of furniture from Goodman/Wasserman, a small furniture store, down on Figueroa Street in Los Angeles. Here again, she financed it with a down payment.

I don’t recall, at the time, ever having it so good. A short few years after Uncle Fernando’s farm, to a new home – filled with new furniture, plenty to eat, some nice clothes, going to the movies... a lot – what more could a young boy want!? And then... WHAM!

A few months after moving to Burbank, Jimmy was drafted and in a few weeks, he was gone. A few weeks later, Bill joined the Navy to keep from being drafted in the Army. He was gone... déjà vu. There sat Mom and I alone, again, except this time with a large mortgage payment and a big furniture bill staring us in the face. It took months for the boys to send an allotment home for us, and even when it came, it was totally insufficient – for the amount of bills, plus food for us.

Just like my three brothers before me, I quit school and got a job. I was 14 years old and scared to death to face life so abruptly. I got a job in downtown L.A. at the Jeffrey Bank Note Company. They were currently making money for foreign governments, such as China and, I believe, Mexico. I had to have government clearance, for it was deemed national security and government controlled.

My job was to burn huge piles of printed currency in the large furnace in the basement. There had been a mistake in the printing process, so the money had to be destroyed... tons of it. There were security guards – to make sure we didn't take some home with us. After the burning, they put me in the "cleaning room."

There were several large, flat table-like structures that had six-inch sides and were about eight feet square. We would take the used stainless steel printing plates, put them in the containers, cover them with water plus some sort of chemical – and turn on the machines. The tables would move back and forth – right and left. We added several dozen large ball bearings to the solution. The movement of the ball bearings, combined with the other elements, gradually erased the printed pictures on the plate, so that they could be used again – making sure no one got their hands on the plates for counterfeiting purposes.

I worked there for about six months, but wasn't making enough money to make ends meet at home. I saw an ad in the paper and got a job at Durochrome Co., a silk-screen processing company, on Santa Fe Street in East L.A. I began as a racker for the printers. I was making about \$40 a week, which was "Big Bucks" for a 14-year-old kid. Now, with the boys' allotments, we were finally catching up.

I recall at one time, Mom couldn't make the furniture payment, so she called the store and told Mr. Wasserman, one of the owners, what happened – Jim and Bill in the service and her youngest going to work – that she would make it up in the near future if he would let the payments stop for a while. He told her that she had done more than her share, with two boys in the service and for her not to worry – "Send the payments when she could – everything would be fine."

As I said, we lived about a mile and a half beyond the end of the streetcars tracks. I would rise each morning, six days a week, at 5 am, walk or hitchhike up to the car line, ride the "red car" through Glendale, Edendale, Atwater and finally, through the tunnel into downtown Los Angeles. Then, I would walk from Hill Street, down Third Street to Santa Fe, about six blocks – as I recall – get on another streetcar and ride several blocks... to work. The entire trip was about two hours.

I would work, sometimes, nine to 10 hours a day, for we were in a defense-related business – making decals for instrument panels on American fighter aircraft... then I reverse my route back to Burbank. I was working my butt off, but never stopped thinking of getting into "Show Biz." On the long streetcar rides – like the long days, riding herd on my stick-horse, on the farm – my mind ran rampant with thoughts of grandeur and living the life of an entertainer.

My mind wandered a lot. I could focus forever if something interested me, but things that I had no interest in completely eluded me... like the time I was sitting in Miss Edith's seventh-grade class. It was study time and the entire class was reading... all, except me, of course. I had a large book propped up, in front of me, on my desk – hiding my movements. My old faithful wrist watch had stopped and I had taken the back off the timepiece and with the point of the blade of a small pen knife, was probing deep inside the watch's mechanism – trying to “start something.” Miss King suddenly and rather loudly asked, “Morris Poindexter, what are you doing?!!” Her voice startled me and I jumped a foot – at the same time, extricating the blade from the “guts” of the watch – pulling all of the working parts, into the aisle. Pieces of my “old faithful” were all over Miss King's classroom floor.

Other day, I would sit and stare out the window of the room. Finally, Miss King moved me next to the hallway wall, away from the windows. That didn't stop me for I could daydream, staring at the floor. Miss King, finally, had me stay after school and gave me a gentle, but good “talking to.”

She was a striking, tall lady – probably in her sixties – but what does a 14-year-old know about age? She wore her hair pulled back and knotted at the back of her head. She wore long, old-fashioned dresses with puffed sleeves and a high piece of lace that completely covered her throat. She was really a picture out of the Gay Nineties. She told me that she thought that I had great spirit, but I should learn to channel it. “Make it work for you, not against you.” She spoke softly and gently, but her lesson got through to me. I became one of her prized pupils, by the year's end. She got me interested in California's history, and I loved it. I began getting a “B” average... and for me that was great!

After several months at Durochrome, Bill came home on leave before “shipping out.” The (still fairly new) Chevy had been setting in our garage – for Mom couldn't drive, nor could I. I talked Bill into teaching me to drive. He and Mom both were against it, but I insisted. I was now “the man of the house” and I should be able to start acting like it. Mom said, “You won't be 15 years old until June, a few months away – so learn to drive, but not anywhere except to the car line and back.

Bill tried to teach me to drive, but he had no patience and would get angry every time I did something wrong. I recall that the cars then had clutches to shift the gears. My left foot and leg would slowly let the clutch out, but my leg was shaking so badly that I would kill the engine. Bill, finally, gave up and that was the end of the lessons.

After Bill went to sea, I got into the car one day, put the gear into reverse, backed the car out of the garage onto the street, and slowly drove away. My mom stood and watched... with her mouth opened. From that day on, I drove to the streetcar line in the morning, parked the car and drove it home in the afternoon. In June, when I became 15, I got my driver's license.

Looking back, I guess due to the war, if you were in defense work – which I was – you didn't have to have a learner's permit. Anyway, I started driving from Burbank to East L.A., six days a week and never had any accidents. It cut about an hour off my travel time daily. Within six months working at Durochrome, I was elevated to the position of printer. My salary went up and everything seemed fine.

Through the grapevine, word was out that another silk-screen company was looking for head printers and they were paying extremely well. I had only been a printer for about six months, but had really learned my trade – mainly because I liked the work. I applied at the other company – namely, Smith-Martin – just a few blocks from Durochrome. I got the job, along with a big raise.

CHAPTER 9

By this time, 1943, most eligible working men had been drafted, so as the song goes, we were “either too young or too old.” I was 16 years old and making the wage of a married man with a family. Mom and I had enough money, but there was rationing – certain foodstuff, shoes, clothes, gasoline – you name it, it was rationed.

By now, Jimmy had finished Officers Candidate School, was a Second Lieutenant – somewhere in England – a member of the Engineering Corp. Foster, too, was somewhere in England serving in the infantry. Bill was a gunner’s mate on a merchant ship, somewhere at sea. Mom would go to bed worried and wondering where her boys were and praying to God to keep them safe. She had depended so strongly on Jimmy, after she lost my father and now, she had turned her trust and future to all she had left – her 16-year-old boy.

Mom and I would spend as much time as we could at the movies — every Sunday evening and sometimes once during midweek. I was always the “personality boy” and Mom finally said, “Why don’t you try and be an actor? Heaven knows you’re always acting at home.” I jumped at the chance, never thinking that she would ever feel that way about me.

One night after working all day I showered, ate dinner and Mom and I drove over to Hollywood to a place Mom had seen advertised for acting lessons. The establishment was Geller’s Workshop and Theater, on the corner of Wilshire and Fairfax Boulevards. She enrolled me and after a couple of classes (Monday and Friday nights) I told her, “This isn’t for me,” and I left.

During this brief period, Mom met the mother of one of the pupils – Charles St. Clair. The two of them hit it off right away. The St. Clairs were from Oklahoma, so she and Mom felt they had something in common – coming from the same part of the country, so to speak. “Mitty” as Mrs. St. Clair was called, told Mom of another drama school in Hollywood, The Rainbow Studios.

Charles and I were not in the same classes at Geller’s, for although he was a couple of years younger than I, he was already a professional. He had one of the most beautiful Irish tenor voices that I had ever heard. He was a member of the Bob Mitchell Boys Choir, which was a Catholic choir who sang not only in church. But also did professional engagements. Charles and the choir were in a few movies – *Going My Way* starring Bing Crosby and *The Bells Of St. Mary’s*, also with Bing. Later in 1944, Charles sang a solo in the movie *Irish Eyes Are Smiling* starring Dick Haymes and June Haver.

Although Charles and I didn't really know each other at Geller's, Mitty St. Clair and Mom became friends as they sat on hard wooden chairs in the hallway – waiting for their sons to learn acting. Previous to starting at Geller's, Mom took me to a school for radio acting on Highland Avenue, just above Hollywood Boulevard. The instructor took me into a closed glass booth and gave me The Gettysburg Address to read. When I got to the part, "Today, we are engaged in a great Civil 'Wah,'" the instructor said, "Wait a minute! Read that last sentence over." I repeated, "in a great Civil 'Wah.'" He said, "Since when did 'war' become 'wah'!" Being from Arkansas, I still had a soft "r" in my speech, without realizing it. I said the only thing that came to my mind... "President Roosevelt says 'Wah' and that's enough for me!" It was not meant to sound sarcastic. It was my true feeling at the time. The instructor felt – wisely, I'm sure – that I was not suited to be one of his students.

We went to Rainbow Studios, about half a block south of Hollywood Boulevard on Cahuenga Boulevard. Located about the Greyhound Bus depot, there were several rooms for instruction, such as drama and singing, and a small dance studio. At the end of the hallway, in the center was a "small theater." It had a small stage with drawn curtains – just like a regular stage, but on a miniscule level. The theater seated about 40 people.

The director of the drama school was George Howard. George was an incredible instructor – be it drama or comedy. I enrolled at Rainbow and instantly loved it. George taught practical lessons. He would give us a certain amount of basic drama and after his instruction, would allow us to read a scene from a well-known play. Being the ham that I was, I couldn't wait to get the scene reading because George would put me and the actors on stage and would block out the staging, as we went along. He was a stickler for movement and kept the scenes moving briskly – whether it was a comedy or drama. Tempo was very important to him and his plays always moved along and were never boring. George was always in rehearsal with the more advanced pupils, plus outside semi-professional actors in a famous Broadway play.

I had taken instruction – plus reading scenes – for about a year before I graduated to the cast, for a regular performance in a three-act play. My first part was small and they aged me several years, for at the time, I was still only 17 years old. Through mid-1943 till mid-1945, I worked my six days a week job – drove to East L.A. and back to Burbank. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday, I would get home, then to Hollywood for my lessons and later, parts in plays at the Rainbow Studios. We would rehearse three nights a week and present the plays on Saturday and Sunday evenings. I was only getting about six hours sleep, but I was young and I loved what I was doing.



Maury Dexter — age 17

During that two-year period, I took singing lessons, as well as dancing lessons, at Rainbow. The dance director was Johnny Boyle, a well-known movie choreographer. After several lessons, I decided to quit. Not only did I have two left feet, but I thought it was “sissy” for a tall (six-foot plus) skinny boy to do movements that, to me, were effeminate. I also stopped my singing lessons for I realized, very quickly, that I would never be a Bing Crosby or Frank Sinatra. So... I concentrated on my acting.

I loved the Rainbow Studios. I would see people like Ava Garner, Mitzi Gaynor (I think her name was Mitzi Gerber in those days), Cyd Charisse, etc. They were there taking dancing and singing lessons, too.

The two years of burning the candle on both ends finally caught up with me. One very warm summer day in 1945, I had gone across the street from my workplace to a small diner for lunch – as I had done, for as long as I had worked there. I remember that the small eatery was packed full and in those days, there was no air conditioning and the place was terribly hot. I stupidly ordered a hot meal – stuffed cabbage. I recall taking several bites and suddenly, everything went black. My head fell into my plate of cabbage.

When I awoke, several hours later, I was in a hospital room – somewhere. Apparently, they rushed me to the hospital thinking that I was dying – when in actuality, I had a combination of heat stroke and almost total exhaustion. The doctor said that I should

stop one of my activities – work or my plays. He said that I had come very close to a nervous breakdown. Mom tried, in vain, to stop me from doing more plays, but I was determined to make something of myself. I did, however, stop doing every production and would only act in every other production.

During these years, we became very close to the St. Clairs. Beside “Mitty” and “Chuck,” there were his sister, Ethel Marie and his older Brother, Johnny – as well as his father, John Sr. The St. Clairs lived in an apartment house on Wilton Place – just north of Melrose Avenue. Directly across the street from their apartment was the side entrance to Paramount Studios. When we visited them, which was often, I would look out of their third-floor window and see Paramount and wonder what movies they were filming and if I would ever be lucky enough to get through those gates.

The St. Clairs were one of the nicest families I have ever known. How and why we finally drifted apart, I don’t know. I only know that I regret the fact that we did.

CHAPTER 10

In the fall of 1945, I was able to get an agent, Charley Beyers, by name. One of his agents had seen me in a play at Rainbow and suggested the agency sign me. Rainbow Theater was primarily a showcase for all of the talent scouts – from the various motion picture studios. Every studio had at least one talent scout. It was amazing how few legitimate small theaters there were at that time in Hollywood. Rainbow was considered one of the best.

The Beyer's office called and told me to report to Columbia Studios' casting office, on a certain date. I took off from my regular job and went on the interview at Columbia. To my great surprise, I got a small part in a Three Stooges comedy (*Uncivil War Birds*, 1945). It was only one day's work and a few lines, but it got me my Screen Actors Guild (SAG), and the only way you could belong to the SAG was if a studio hired you... and that's the truth! Anyway, thank goodness I got my card. The price of the card was the same as my daily wage. So, I worked for nothing except it opened the door to opportunity for me.



It was ironic because I played a young Southern gentleman, somewhere down South – just prior to the Civil War. I had a scene where I ran in and told Moe, Curly and Larry (the Stooges) that the war had just begun. My actual line was, “We’re in it – we’re in the Civil War!” The director, Mr. White, said to me, “Listen, son, you’re a Southerner. Give me a Southern accent.” So, on the first take, I ran into the scene and yelled, “We’re in it – we’re in the Civil Wah!!” After trying for two years to lose my accent, it got me my first job in the movies – and I thought of the man who told me there was no place in show biz for a person who said “wah.”

After my “movie debut,” I continued doing plays at Rainbow and working full time at my printing job. We had a few people who became successful through their work at the theater. Jimmy Lloyd was one such person. Jimmy had gotten a seven-year contract with Columbia Pictures from appearing in one of George’s plays. Also, Murray Hamilton became quite well known, too – in the movies. Jimmy Lloyd was one of my best friends during that time. He and his wife, Betty, and their two children were close to both me and Mom.

I met a fellow at Rainbow named Dan Simmons. He and I became the closest of friends – more like close brothers. Dan was also from Arkansas, a town in the Southern part of the state named Jonesboro. He was three or four years my senior and an exceptionally bright guy. He was studying acting, but was an accomplished piano player. We were the very best of friends for years. I learned more from listening to Dan than one could imagine. He didn’t know it, but he was helping me make up some of the education that I had missed – when I dropped out of school in the last year of the ninth grade. Dan never tried to teach me anything. I just always picked up on things that he would say in his usual way.

During the years 1943 to 1945, Dan was like a brother I never had, that is, being the youngest in my family – the older boys were much too mature to spend much time, socially, with me. Dan, even though a little older, found that we had a lot in common and we were really close pals for years.

While I was doing a play at Rainbow in 1945, I played opposite a young girl named Beverly Blake, nee Fessenden, later Garland. She was just starting out and I fell madly in love with her. This was my first serious love affair, even though I was just 18 years old. Bev and I would spend time together as often as possible – horseback riding, picnicking, driving to the beach, etc. I was fully taken by this wonderful girl. After months of courtship, Bev decided to spend a few weeks at Catalina Island. I tried to talk her out of it, but she was determined.

Those weeks that she was gone were extremely lonely for me. I couldn't wait for her return to the mainland. Finally, she called... she was back!... but with one small difference, she was no longer Miss Blake, but now Mrs. Campbell! She never knew it, but I thought my poor young heart would surely break. In Catalina, she obviously had gotten over our little affair. However, it took me more than a year to get over it. I still think of her with a warm heart. I guess your very first real love is something you never quite get over.

Shortly after that, I met another girl that I fell for. I was on the rebound and again thought... this is it! I was 20 and she was 19. We never got married, but spent endless hours in motels around the San Fernando Valley. We were sexually well suited, but after that – we were really strangers. She had been married at 17 and divorced. She also had a one-and-a-half-year-old daughter. Looking back, I now know that she was really looking for a father for her child.

We went to Las Vegas about six months later to get married, but I backed out. No one knew, not my family nor my friends about the near elopement. I had a really good buddy named Bob Davis and I always suspected that he might have known. The lady's name shall remain anonymous, as I respect her too much to talk about something that happened many years ago... discretion being the better part of valor, and so on. After that, I dated a number of girls – each time vowing not to get married, at least not until I had “grown up” a little.

1944-1945 was an exciting time for me. Marred only by the war and even wondering what was happening to my three brothers – far across the seas – fighting for me and Mom, and millions like us. Whenever Mom and I went for a drive – usually to Hollywood to a movie or to the Rainbow Studios – we would never pass a serviceman, hitchhiking or walking. We would always stop and offer them a ride. There were times when the Chevy was crammed full of servicemen. We would, many times, go out of our way – gasoline permitting – to drop the boys off, along the way.

We heard less and less frequently from my brothers – never knowing from day to day if they were dead or alive. In early 1945, Mom received news that Bill was in a hospital – somewhere in the mid-east. It seems, as we found out after the war, that the merchant marine ship that Bill was assigned to as gunners mate, was blown out from under them – somewhere in the Arabian Sea. Bill and a few of his fellow sailors were adrift for three days and three nights. They were finally rescued by a British ship. Amazingly, the only injuries were exposure and hunger. He regained his strength and was back on duty a few weeks later.

By the time D-Day arrived, Jimmy had been promoted to the rank of Captain in the engineering corps, and like Foster, was stationed in England. Foster, who was a Master Sergeant in the infantry, tried several times to get Jimmy to have him transferred into Jimmy's unit. Jimmy was company commander and knowing Foster's character – of being irresponsible – refused to order the transfer. Later, however, when they both were in combat somewhere in France, Jimmy relented and had Foster join his unit.

During these “best of times and worst of times,” I continued to work all week at Smith-Marin and do plays at Rainbow Studios under the direction of George Howard on the weekends. In the spring of 1945, I was doing my fourth lead in a play George presented. The current play was a comedy about young people, entitled *Wallflower*. The lead role – that of a young man about to enter the Air Force, and at the same time being rejected by the “love of his life” – was a very strong part and I played it to the hilt.

One of my other buddies, whom I had met at Rainbow, was a young, good-looking fellow by the name of Don Gordon (not the same Don Gordon who later became well known as an actor on both coasts, but non-the-less, still a very good actor in his own right). Anyway, Don had a small part in this play in which I was starring – not to say that he had not had bigger roles in past plays. We were sort of a repertory company and some times, if there were no parts for you, you would take a lesser role. It was terrific experience and also helped keep your feet on the ground.

Egotistically speaking, on opening night of the play, Don told me that a friend of his, a producer at Republic Studios, was coming to catch his performance and if he liked it, there was a chance he might get a part in one of the producer's movies. I said “good luck,” but was wondering why he would invite someone as important as a producer to see him in a very small role. I never found that question out, but the producer and his wife did show up and sat through the entire three acts. When the last curtain came down, Don told me that the producer was in the audience, applauding.

The cast went to their respective dressing rooms to take off the grease paint and dress into our regular clothes. Don waited and waited, but no producer came backstage. Don finally went out front and all of the audience had gone. Poor Don felt terrible and I really felt badly for him, but to this day, I can't understand his rationale for inviting the man in the first place.

It was a tradition at the theater that after every performance, the cast and sometimes George Howard, our director, would walk together two blocks up Hollywood Boulevard to Vine Street and have coffee and pie at Dupar's Restaurant. That night however, Don didn't go with us. He felt too dejected, so I and the rest of the cast of about eight walked to Dupar's.

At the entrance to the eatery, I opened the main door and held it open until our group had entered. As I was about to follow, a nice-looking middle-aged man and woman were waiting to leave. I continued holding the door ajar for their exit and as they passed me, the man put his hand on my arm and said, “Will you please step over here. I’d like to talk with you.” My group had already gone inside and were being seated. I thought, “Here I am standing on Vine Street at 11 pm with some guy holding on to my arm.” Admittedly, I was somewhat taken back and a little nervous for I had heard about all sorts of strange people in Hollywood, but to date, had never encountered them. So I thought, “Well, maybe this is my time.”

Before any more thoughts ran through my mind, the man said, “My name is Donald H. Brown (handing me his card) and this is my wife. We saw your outstanding performance tonight at Rainbow Studios. I’m a producer at Republic Studios and if you will call me on Monday morning, I would like to set up an appointment with you. I think I can use you in my next picture.” I looked at his card and looked back to him and said, “I’m dumbfounded, Mr. Brown. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!!”

He and his wife turned and walked away, leaving me standing alone and trying to literally get my feet back on the pavement. A few minutes later, when the shock had worn off, I entered the café and joined my group.

Most of my young life, I had read or heard of people getting into the movies by sheer luck and nothing else. These stories were a publicity man’s dream. I found out that they never really happened. Not that I was “discovered” opening the door to Dupar’s Restaurant at 11 pm on a Saturday evening either, but at that moment, it sure seemed like it. Don Brown told me later that, of course, the meeting was purely accidental – for he was going to phone Rainbow Studios on Monday morning and leave his phone number at the studio for me to contact him.

I will tell you, that evening when I got home to Burbank and told Mom what had happened, she and I both broke down with tears of unbelievable joy. All that night and the next day, Sunday, I kept repeating to myself the words that I heard while standing on Vine Street – “I think I can use you in my next picture”... I knew he didn’t say I will use you, but to me it was all of the inspiration that I needed.

I took Monday morning off from work and at eight o’clock, I called the studio and asked to speak with Mr. Donald H. Brown. The switchboard operator said that the executive offices opened at 9 am. I said that I would call back. That hour seemed like a lifetime. Finally, at exactly 9 am, I called again. Mr. Brown’s secretary said that he was in a writer’s meeting and she would have him return my call later in the morning. I was

starting to feel let down and began to wonder, if all of this was really just one of my numerous fantasies. But looking at Mr. Brown's business cards convinced me otherwise. I remember walking the floor of the living room waiting for the phone to ring. I would walk outside, just far enough, so that I could still hear the phone ring. I began to get nervous thinking that I had to leave before 11 am in order to drive to east LA to my work. As I said earlier, we were doing defense work and it slowed production when someone didn't show up. About 10:45 am, I told Mom that I was leaving for work and to explain to Mr. Brown that I had to leave, if he ever called. As I stepped out of the front door, the phone rang. I ran quickly inside, grabbed the receiver and breathlessly said, "Hello!"

The caller was Mr. Brown's secretary and she put me through to him. He told me that he had just returned from a meeting with his writers and that he had instructed them to rewrite the script of his movie to include a juvenile lead. Those words rang in my ears "Juvenile Lead!" I was hoping for a good part, but heaven knows that in my wildest dreams, I could have never thought about a juvenile lead. I was, for the first time in my life, literally speechless. He told me that in a couple of weeks he would have the rewritten script and would call me to pick up a copy so that I could read it, and give my approval or disapproval. He said, "I hope you like it for I've had the role written to suit your talent."

At the meeting, a few weeks later in Mr. Brown's office, when I went to the studio to pick up the revised script, he told me that the original script that he was about to go into production with was a comedy, but something about the story kept bothering him and he couldn't put his finger on the problem. He then said that when he saw me in *Wallflower* he knew exactly what was wrong with the script. He stated that the original story was funny but the characters were all adult comedians, either straight comedians or comedy "heavies" – so-called bad guys. After seeing the play, he knew that the missing ingredient was youth. There were no young people in the movie to appeal to the younger audience! So, he had a juvenile boy and an ingénue written into the script to help balance out the plot.

The movie was titled *One Exciting Week*. It starred Al Pearce and the cast from his hit radio show. Also in the cast were some truly great people – Will Wright, Mary Treen, Shemp Howard (brother to Moe and Curly Howard of the Three Stooges), Arthur Loft, Pinky Lee, Jerome Cowan and of course...Maury Dexter (that would be me after the studio changed my name).

Several weeks after I picked up my script, we started to shoot. As a matter of fact, the first day of production was Dec. 14th, 1945. I know because I still have the original

players contract and the stub of my first week's check, \$250. I signed a contract in 1945 for \$250 per week when the average wage earned was probably around \$100 per, if that.

Al Pearce was a big radio star and he also did a few movies. He and his entire radio cast were terrific people. Al was very laid back and extremely friendly, as well as being totally professional. His famous radio character was Elmer Blurp, a shy door-to-door salesman. Every time he would knock on a door to sell something, he would say to himself, "Hope there's nobody home. I hope, hope, hope." Pinky Lee was one of the several characters in the movie, as was Shemp Howard. He later joined the Stooges after his brother Curly died. I remember the time that I worked with them – it was August 25, 1945. I know, because I still have that paycheck stub too. The gross amount was \$25. The net was \$19.37.

The very first day of shooting on *One Exciting Week*, I had a long scene with lots of dialogue. Being from the stage, I certainly had no problem remembering a four- or five-page scene. I was used to retaining an entire three-act play. Anyway, there was a rehearsal and the director, William Beaudine, went for a "take." We went through the entire scene. There were four other actors in the scene, besides me. Mr. Beaudine said, "Cut, one more time." We shot the scene again and I heard, "Cut, one more time." Again we did the entire scene and again, "Cut, one more time."

After the fourth take, Mr Beaudine got up from the front of the crab dolly, a four-wheeled device that moved the camera in any direction except straight up or down. He walked over to me and said, "Sam (he called everyone Sam), come with me." He put his hand on my shoulder and we started to walk away from the set toward the rear of the enormous sound stage.

Bill Beaudine was an extremely tall, slender man with a "French twist" mustache. He was probably three inches taller than my six-foot height. Without a word, he walked me completely to the end of the stage, through set after set, and finally paused, looked down at me and said, very softly, "Sam, I want you to do me a big favor." Although I was totally confused, I said "Yes, sir, Mr. Beaudine. Anything, anything at all." He put his hand on my shoulder, squared us off – looked directly into my eyes and shouted... "STOP ACTING!!" He turned, walked back to our set and left me standing alone, somewhat frightened and confused.

I had no idea what he meant. I soon found out however, being from the stage I was prone to overdo everything. My physical actions were stressed, my voice was too loud and I picked up my cues too quickly. In other words, I didn't understand motion picture technique... yet. However, I pulled myself together and walked back to the

set where everyone was waiting. Bill Beaudine said, "Let's try it again." I was hurt and nervous and I just "walked through" the scene saying my lines without emotion. When the scene was over, Beaudine said, "Fine. Print it."

That was my "baptism of fire" in the movies. On that, my first real role, I learned very quickly how to approach acting in a natural way. Years later, when I was directing pictures for Lippert/Fox, I ran into a similar situation with a new, young actor. It was his first day in pictures – he too, was from the stage. He too was "acting" and was way overboard in the small part. Unlike Mr. Beaudine, my mentor, I took the fellow aside and quietly explained how motion picture technique differed from the stage. After that, he gave a good performance and went on to do well in the business.

The old time directors, like Beaudine, never really knew how to work with actors. They were terrific at getting the film in on time and under budget, but seldom took time to direct actors, per se – at least not any that I ever worked with. *One Exciting Week* was not only my first movie, but my introduction to Bill Beaudine, Jr., the director's son. Junior was the second assistant director and Andrew McLaglen was the first assistant director. Andy and I worked together 15 years later.

I was the producer and Andy was the director on a film for 20th Century Fox, entitled, *The Little Shepherd Of Kingdom Come*, the famous John Fox, Jr. classic novel. After that, Andy went on to direct some of the most successful Westerns, including several that starred John Wayne. Bill Beaudine, Jr. became a well-known production manager and supervisor on many films and TV shows.

The time that I spent at Republic was exciting and fun for me. It was a small studio, but they treated us all like family. Herbert "Pappy" Yates was in charge and Armand "Mandy" Schaffer was the main producer and production chief. I did several more films there including some Westerns starring "Wild" Bill Elliott. Speaking of Westerns, I recall going on the set of another cowboy star, Roy Rogers. The first time I met Roy, I was deeply impressed with what a really down to earth, nice guy he was.

I had a lot of time on my hands during those days, so I organized a local Burbank theater group. Over the next three years, I would have produced and directed over a dozen well-known Broadway plays. Some of the talent were actors whom I had worked with at Rainbow Studios and others were strictly local talent. In the first year or so, we would rehearse in different cast members' homes and would rent the North Hollywood Playhouse to present our shows. It had a fairly large stage and seated about 100 people. We were non-profit – using the proceeds each time to produce the next play.

CHAPTER 11

The war was over. Foster, Jimmy and Bill all returned home in one piece. They all had been to hell and back, but slowly began adjusting to peacetime. Jimmy returned with a steel pin in his ankle and a steel plate in his head. In the beginning, he showed no ill effects – that is, not until years later. Foster went back to his wife, Marie, so Mom and my two Brothers were once again together. Not for long, however.

Jimmy had gone in the army a buck private and when he was discharged, he received his Majority. He was one smart dude. While overseas, Jimmy began correspondence with an old girlfriend from high school back in Fort Smith, Arkansas. Apparently, they wrote a lot, for much to everyone's surprise, after a few weeks at home, Jimmy drove back to Ft. Smith and married the girl. Within that same year, Bill married and moved out also. So Mom and I were alone again.

We would put our plays on for a week or two at the theater and after we closed, we would take the shows to various army hospitals, within a 50-mile radius of L.A. and entertain the physically and mentally wounded service men.

George Howard, the director at Rainbow Studios, taught me that timing and pace is the most important thing in comedy. He would say, "Pick up the pace, pick up the pace," during rehearsals. I never forgot that and it was a rule that I strictly enforced during rehearsal for comedy shows that I directed. Rather than stop the cast during the last days of a rehearsal, if the scene began to bog down, I would snap my fingers a few times and they knew what I meant – "Pick up the pace."

We were doing a show one night at the Birmingham Hospital in Van Nuys and the huge auditorium was packed with disabled service men. They were all dressed in white robes and pajamas. The show opened and the first and second acts were going great. It was one of the best audiences that we had ever played to. They laughed and applauded at all the right spots. During the opening of act three, I was standing in the wings, backstage, really pleased with the show thus far, when all of a sudden the cast began to pick up their cues very quickly and rush their dialogue. I stepped closer to the stage, from the wings and whispered, "Slow it down, slow down..." The cast continued to rush through their dialogue and I couldn't get their attention – except – when there was a lull in the scene and the dialogue stopped for someone's exit from stage. I heard a noise coming from the front row center. I looked down and there sat a patient with his mouth agape, snapping his fingers loudly. The cast obviously thought it was me and were ready to kill me when the curtain came down. We had not been told that the entire group was psychiatric patients. Not that we cared, because as I said, they were the best audience we ever played to.

I had a very good friend during those days. He was, as I mentioned earlier, Bob Davis. In later years, we referred to him as little Bob, not that he was little, far from it. But I knew another Bob Davis, only he was about 6'3". Big Bob, as we called him, was a band vocalist with some of the Big Bands of the 40s. He had one of the greatest voices that I ever heard. Anyway, Little Bob and I were very close. We spent nearly every Saturday night, for a couple of years, at the Hollywood Palladium Ballroom. We would usually double date, but sometimes go stag and take our chances. We were pretty successful getting dancing partners – and sometimes, a little more.

Due to my movie work, I always had enough money to buy custom tailored clothes, including shirts. When I was doing my first film, *One Exciting Week*, the cameraman, John Alton, told me that I should get some high collar shirts made. He said that for a “good photographic look” at least one inch of a man’s shirt collar should show above the coat line. I went out and immediately had a dozen customized shirts, with two-inch collars and initials above the pocket made. I also went to MacIntosh’s – the really “in place” to have men’s tailored clothes made. Most of the leading male actors of the time were clients.

I remember that my first stripped grey flannel double-breasted, one-button suit cost me \$125. That was a lot of dough in those days! The shirts cost \$25 dollars each and so was that a lot of money. The suit coat had broad shoulders and was extra long. The pants came up about three inches above the waistline and the best loops were at your natural waistline. The knees of the slacks were 19” and the cuffs were 10”. It was a subtle version of the early 40s Zoot Suit. It was, however, the style of the day.

My good Buddy (Jimmy Lloyd), saw me all dressed up one day and said, “You look good, except for that old-fashioned knot in your tie. You need the new look, a Windsor Knot.” He proceeded to show me how to tie a Windsor Knot and I in turn showed all of my male friends. As we now know, it was a much neater look than the old four-n-hand knot that was popular for so long. Today, after nearly 50 years, the fashion has swung back to the four-n-hand. It wasn’t until years later that I heard that the Windsor Knot was named after the Duke of Windsor.

A little later I had more clothes made by MacIntosh. One in particular was a rather loud, wide-checked sport coat. It was my favorite coat and I wore it a lot of the time. Little Bob Davis loved that coat, too, and sometimes he would ask to wear it if we were double dating. I told him that the girls would know it was my coat because it was so distinctive, but he didn’t care. So, we used to take turns wearing that coat on Saturday night dates.

The years 1945 through 1950 were great for me. I was doing exactly what I wanted, acting and directing plays and having a ball. There were several girls that I fell in love with, but none really seriously – after Beverly. I never thought about taking any affair too much to heart. But I sure did enjoy loving the ladies of the moment. There were a couple of gals that I really got interested in. One was Virginia Lester, a very pretty local girl who resembled Jennifer Jones. She appeared in several of my stage productions. She had a lot of talent and we were very close for some time. Emily Smith was my later heartthrob. She was beautiful and also talented. I followed her all the way to New York City, but that's another story.

Another good Buddy during those days was Don Shartel. He was one of the most talented guys I knew. I referred to him as a young Sid Ceasar for he could make you laugh just by walking into a room. Don would have been a big star, I'm sure, except he never could get material good enough to match his talents.

After my interlude at Republic Studios, I began to freelance. The very first job I got was a role in a New Ross Hunter picture entitled *The Sweetheart Of Sigma Chi*. Also in the film was Elyse Knox, her new husband, Tom Harmon, Phil Regan and a plethora of terrific character actors like Paul Guilfoyle, Eddie Brophy, Alan Hale Jr., young Robert Arthur, Bill Beaudine Jr., Fred Datig Jr. (whose father was in casting at MGM Studios) were also in the cast.

We spent six weeks on location at Newport/Balboa, California, and what a ball we had! There were a group of coeds in the film and the other guys and I were taking out a different one almost every night.

Ross Hunter was a rising star at Columbia Studios. I'm told that he received more fan mail than Columbia's biggest star, Rita Hayworth for the previous year. He had only done a few second features at Columbia, but the girls went crazy over his looks. He broke his seven-year contract with Harry Cohn, the studio's top brass.

Sweetheart was his first starring part since leaving Columbia. Ross needed direction and at Columbia he got it. In *Sweetheart*, the director let him tackle the role by himself and unfortunately, Ross didn't really come across on the big screen. As far as I know that was his last acting role. He later began producing plays in and around Hollywood and the San Fernando Valley, and in a few years, he was producing major motion pictures at Universal. The rest, as they say, is history.



Head shot, 1948.

After *Sweetheart*, I did a few films at Columbia. By late 1948, things began to slow down for me. Roles were becoming harder to get and I changed agents. I signed with Don Montgomery, Robert Montgomery's brother. After weeks of no work, I drove to the agency out on Beverly Boulevard in Beverly Hills and had a meeting with Don. His office was located in the rear of the building and it overlooked the alley behind. I said, "Surely Don, there must be some parts for me out there." He said things were so slow that two-thirds of his clients hadn't worked for months. He asked me to look out of the rear window into the alley. I walked over and looked out. About a hundred feet down the alley were several men digging a trench for a new sewer line. I looked and asked, "What am I looking for?" Don said, "See those men? The big handsome guy helping to dig that trench is a client of mine. His name is Jim Davis. Last year, he co-starred with Betty Davis at Warner Bros. in a big picture and he hasn't worked since. There just isn't anything going on at this time." I never bothered him again.

The girl I mentioned earlier, Emily Smith, had changed her name to Joy Windsor and was working at a theater in Hollywood with the Ken Murray Blackouts, as a showgirl. We rarely saw each other, for she worked six nights a week and matinees on the weekend. The less I saw of her, the more I missed her. Joy had been in a couple of my

plays and in one show I needed the part of a young messenger boy, so I cast Joy's young brother Bill Smith. He was about 12 years old at the time and I guess the "acting bug" must have bitten him, for Bill Smith became a well-known actor when he reached adulthood.

My friend Don Shartel's parents knew some people by the name of Nelson. When I started getting discouraged for lack of work, Mrs. Shartel introduced me to the Nelsons. They said that they were close friends of Mae Murray, the one-time silent screen star. I later found out that in her hey day, she was really "a biggie." Anyway, they set an appointment up with Miss Murray at her Hollywood hotel. It was the Lido Hotel, on Wilcox Avenue, one block north of Hollywood Boulevard.

I arrived at the hotel on the given date, checked the register for her apartment number, took the elevator to the top floor, walked to her door, and rang the bell. The door opened and there stood someone that, first of all I had never heard of, and secondly, someone who appeared to be stepping out of a silent movie set of many years ago. She was dressed in an ensemble that she had worn in one of her many films. She was no longer young, but she was still beautiful and even in the wardrobe of yesterday, you could clearly see what a beauty she must have been. She graciously invited me in and offered me tea.

The living room drapery was closed and only a single lamp lit the room. There were scrapbooks and memorabilia all over the floor. The closed drapery was nearly covered with different dresses and gowns from her past movies. A bedroom door was open and I could see the room was equally covered with clothes from the past. The bed had several gowns laid out carefully on its spread and other pieces of clothing were hanging on hangers from the walls and windows. She excused the dark room, saying only that the light deteriorates the material in her wardrobe.

This was a couple of years before Sunset Boulevard, and watching that movie brought back vivid moments with Miss Mae Murray. She was charming and warm to me. She said, "I know, young man, what a tough business we're in and if I can help you, I certainly will." She wrote a note to Abe Lastfogel, head of the William Morris Agency, and in it she said, "Abe, this is a fine young actor and a close friend of mine. As a favor to me, please do something for him. As ever, you dear, dear friend, Mae Murray."

I called the agency, which was considered the largest and most influential agency in Hollywood and, using Miss Murray's name, got an appointment with Abe Lastfogel. The day of the appointment, I arrived a little early and Lastfogel's secretary said that he "was in a meeting, would I please have a seat?"

An hour and a half later, I walked into Mr. Lastfogel's office. He said, "Sit down. What can I do for you?" I handed him the note from Miss Murray and he opened the envelope, read the message, put it back into the envelope, arose, leaned over his desk and handed me the note back and said, "Thank you for coming to see me. Give Mae my best. Goodbye." He sat back down – meeting over.

I walked out of his office with an overwhelming desire to return and strangle the son-of-a-bitch. I never called Mae Murray to tell her what happened. For I knew that her "dear, dear friend" Abe, thought of her (as I had thought of the environment in which she was living) as something from the past – to be forgotten.

I'll never forget what a sweet sincere lady she was. Her only fault was believing, as did "Norma Desmond Talmadge," that nothing had really changed and that the world would never forget – especially old and dear, dear friends.

That rejection was all I needed. Joy had just left to go to Broadway with the "Blackouts" and I said to hell with it – I'm going to New York, too!

CHAPTER 12

I had bought a new Ford and thought that I would drive to New York City. I told Mom that I would like to go to Broadway and try my luck there. I had always loved the stage and thought maybe that was really my forte. Mom said, “Fine. Let’s sell the house and go.” A few months later, the house sold and Mom, Dan Simmons and I headed east. Dan was going home to Jonesboro, Arkansas, so we were going to take him there, and drive on to the “Big Apple.” We stopped over in Fort Smith on our way to Jonesboro to visit some relatives.

Just three years before I was in Fort Smith, appearing in person with my movie *One Exciting Week*. I was on tour with the film and had spent several days appearing on stage every night at 8 pm. They would show the movie and I would come on stage and do a 20-minute stand-up routine. The following 20 minutes, or so, I would answer questions from the audience.

By the way, my mom’s sister, Aunt Sula, was there in all her glory. She was showing me off to all of her country club friends, with “my favorite nephew. I always knew he would be a success.” (I wondered if she knew that when she refused to pay a dime so I could see the Saturday afternoon movie along with her own son and daughter.) While I was there for the personal appearance, relatives came “out of the woodwork.” I’ve never met so many people who claimed to be related to me. Even Mom didn’t know most of them.

I remember standing on the theater stage and recalling how, just a short 10 years before, I would collect milk and Coke bottles for their redemption of two cents a piece and when I had gotten 10 cents, I would come to this theater and sit in the dark and watch my cowboy movies. Sometimes, I would sit through the shows three times. I knew that once back outside, in the cold reality of the real world, my life would again be miserable, until the next time that I could scrape together the necessary pittance for the admission.

After leaving Fort Smith, I went south for 22 miles to the little town of Paris, Arkansas. I appeared in person with my movie at the Logan Theater. It was the same theater that I had watched *A Star Is Born* (while eating all of the popcorn and getting my cousin, Bobby fired) nine years earlier. What a wonderful experience being able to stand tall and enjoy the adulation that was being heaped upon me, for I had strong memories of the past – going to sleep hungry, and sitting in this theater aisle, vowing that someday, someday, I was going to be “in the movies.” With the help of the good Lord and the total support of my dear, dear mother, I had at least gotten a foot in the door.

Coming back to the present, 1949, we headed straight for Manhattan Island. Several uneventful days later, we arrived in NY. No one told a country boy from Burbank, California, that no one in their right mind ever brings an automobile to downtown NYC. We checked into the Algonquin Hotel and I soon learned why. The hotel parking cost almost as much as the hotel rooms. You couldn't park on the street during business hours and the cars had to be moved before 6 am each day.

I contacted Joy and we were able to spend time together, but only after her performance, which was around 11:30 pm. By the time she had removed the theatrical makeup and dressed, it was generally after midnight. I seldom got back to the hotel until 3 am. After a couple of weeks, Mom said that I had better get my act together. We had been there for at least three weeks and I hadn't looked for an agent, nor done anything but sleep until noon everyday. A few weeks later, I still had not gotten any work, so Mom decided to go to Philadelphia and spend some time visiting my dad's brother, Rube.

Between the hotel and parking garage bills, it was costing a lot of money. I drove Mom to Philly and spent a few days with relatives that I had never met. Uncle Rube insisted that Mom spend more time with them and I drove back to NY. Joy was sharing an apartment with five of the girls from the show, on Central Part West. The girls insisted that there was room for one more. I bought a sleeping bag and moved in.

The apartment had only one bedroom, but had a pull-down bed in the living room. Two of the girls slept in the bedroom, two slept on the pull-down in the living room, and the other girl slept on the sofa. I slept on the floor in my sleeping bag. It worked okay, except that I stopped going to the theater every night and would go to sleep around 11 pm. Then, at midnight or later, the girls started arriving home and I would lie awake until every one settle into their own niche.

The apartment didn't have a garage for tenants, so I would drive them around town during the day, come back to the apartment in the later afternoon, go upstairs to the living room and sit and watch the traffic – sometimes for an hour or more. My car was double parked in front of the apartment house, and as soon as someone started to enter their parked car, I would run down three flights of stairs, out of the building, jump into my car and wait for the person to leave so that I could have his parking spot. Fortunately, there was no restrictive parking in that neighborhood.

I finally landed a lead role in a live TV show. I think the show was titled, *His And Hers or Hers And His*, whatever. Anyway, it lasted about as long as the running time, which was 15 minutes. The only thing that sticks in my mind is that down the hall from the

studio in which we were shooting, was another show and that the actor was a very young Jack Lemmon. I have no recollection of the title of the show.

I grew tired of Gotham, and as badly as I hated to leave Joy, I packed my sleeping bag, called Dan Simmonds, who had been staying with a relative, I believe, in the Bronx and was also ready to leave, drove over to Philly, picked up Mom and headed to Flint, Michigan, to see another of Dad's brothers – like Uncle Rube, one I had never met. After a few days in Flint, we headed back to “God's country.”

CHAPTER 13

After arriving in Burbank, it was decided that Jimmy and I would start a woodworking company. Jimmy had been working for a trailer manufacturer, and decided that he had the expertise to start his own business. I still had some capitol, so we leased a nice building in Burbank, bought some good used equipment and started building custom cabinets for new homes in the area. Jimmy taught me the art of gluing, sanding and assembling the cabinets, while he designed and, along with four other men, did the actual cutting of the material. We were doing quite well for about a year, then I received a draft notice to appear for a physical.

Back in 1945, I turned 18 years old and was instantly notified to report for my physical. The war was still being fought and my mom went to the local draft board and strongly protested my being drafted. She pointed out that she had already sent three sons to war, and at this time, she didn't know if they were dead or alive, not to mention the fact that I was her only source of support and that I was working in a defense related job. The board ignored her request and I took my physical.

Bob Davis and I were sent down at the same time and as I drove us to the location, I recall Bob saying that because I had a car and he didn't, that we could come home on weekends if we took basic somewhere close to L.A. Looking back, I think that the hard work and long hours that I was putting in, during the three previous years, had something to do with the results of my physical examination, for I was classified 4F, due to a prevalent heart murmur. I was elated, but poor Bob Davis was sick to think that, not only were we going to be separated after all of our good times together, but also no car to come home with on the weekends. Mom and I both thanked God for his mercy. So here, five years later, I am reclassified and passing the physical with flying colors.

I was on a train to Fort Ord, California, on the night of December 20th, 1950, just five days before Christmas. The circle was now complete. Mom had raised four sons, mostly without a husband and father – to have each one of them fight for their country. I remember arriving at 5 am on a cold December morning at Fort Ord. There were probably 60 of us as we disembarked from the train and were ordered to form several lines and come to attention. We were still in our “civies” and I was freezing my butt off.

A sergeant, who probably wasn't much older than I (about 23), began walking down the line of boys standing there – cold, nervous and just downright scared. The Sergeant stopped in front of one of these boys and said in a loud voice, “Do you like it here, soldier?” The boy murmured something and the Sergeant said “Louder, Soldier! I can't hear you!” The boy replied, loudly, “Hell no! I don't like it here!” The Sergeant yelled,

“See those barracks? Double time around it, four times!” The boy started his exercise as the Sergeant continued down the line of young men. He again stopped, looked at a boy and yelled, “What about you, Soldier? You like it around here?” The boy said loudly, “Yes, Sir. I like it around here!” The sergeant replied, “Ten times around that Barracks, at double time. NOBODY likes it around here, soldier!” And that was my introduction to the army.

The next 90 days would be pure hell for me. I was 23 years old and all of the other recruits were no more than 18 or 19 years old. The Korean War was just picking up steam and we all were headed directly to the front lines, as soon as we completed basic training.

I hated the Army with a vengeance. I felt that my mom had given more than her share of sons to the service and I also felt cheated because I really never thought that I would return home from the war. I was a terrible soldier. I did all the right things but inside, I hated every hour of basic training.

On maneuvers, I always felt silly – “play acting,” I thought – trying to protect yourself, running around like a bunch of school boys. In classes, I would think of better days and pleasant memories, not unlike my earlier school days of daydreaming. I thought that 90 days would never end.

About halfway through basic, the orders came down that anyone wanting to test, for OCS (Officers Candidate School) should apply before the last four weeks of basic training. Some guys that I was buddies with decided to take the test. They tried very hard to make me join them. I refused, partly because I didn’t want to extend my two-year hitch to three years by becoming an officer. But most importantly, with my limited education, I knew that I wouldn’t pass the written exam.

My buddies kept telling me that the fighting in Korea was looking better for our side and we would get an extra three months at OCS and by that time the war could be over and we would all miss combat.

It started sounding better all of the time. I like the part about missing combat. I was no hero and all I wanted was to get my hitch over and go home. Reluctantly, I signed up for the OCS testing, knowing that I would never pass. Jimmy had gone to OCS and came home a Major, but I was not Jimmy Poindexter, and I knew it. No one in the company was more surprised than I to discover that I had passed the exams.

I finished basic sometime in late March 1951, and was automatically assigned to six weeks of leadership school, which was preparatory to entering officer’s candidate school. It was incredibly difficult. If you could pass everything that the Army threw

at you in those six weeks, you sure as hell would be prepared for OCS. I won't bother anyone with the details of training in those six weeks, suffice it to say, it was tough! Our last formal inspection was a couple of days prior to graduating – if you passed, that is.

The commanding general of Fort Ord would be present at the final field inspection and our company commander would inspect our quarters inside the barracks. I recall as if it were yesterday, standing at attention, with about 150 other hopefuls in the bright morning sun on the parade field. The inspection was under way and most of us were ready to fall asleep, standing at attention. We had spent most of the night spit-polishing everything that didn't move, including our brass, our shoes, rifles, bayonets, etc.

As the inspector was nearing me, I heard him begin to give out gigs for dirty brass, shoes, rifles, etc., and I knew I wouldn't be any exception. As he stepped in front of me, I presented arms and he grabbed the piece (rifle), inspected it carefully and thrust it back into my poised hands. He looked me up and down and declared loudly, "Now this is what I call a fine specimen of a soldier," so help me, Mitch Miller, that's what he said. When the inspection was over, we were told to return to our barracks where the inside inspection was also completed. As I assumed the "at ease" position, I looked down at my uniform and dear Lord, I did not have my web belt on!

The web belt, which contained my bayonet and canteen, had been left on top of my small closet area at the head of my bunk. I was totally out of uniform! I broke out in a heavy sweat when I realized that the barracks inspector would see the belt, gig me for it, and it would go on my record. The inspector outside would see that and after making an example out of me would be so incensed that he would throw me out of the school. I slowly walked back inside the barracks expecting the worse.

Just inside the entry they had posted the names of those who were giggered. I said a small prayer and walked over to read the names. Mine was not on the list. To this day, so help me, I don't know how on earth that general did not notice the absence of the web belt or how the interior inspector missed it on top of my closet. I only know that somehow, someway, I graduated with honors.

A few days after graduation, we were to get a 10-day leave. Then, we would report directly to the specified place to begin OCS. However, the day before we graduated, orders came down to us that anyone desiring not to continue on the OCS could stay on at Fort Ord and become "Permanent Cadre" – in other words, you could become platoon leaders and begin teaching new recruits the fine art of basic training. The words "Permanent Cadre" rang in my ears. I knew that going through basic training over and over was going to be rough, but I would be close enough to go home on some

weekends and I could sit the Korean War out at Fort Ord, California. I opted to become Cadre, as did several of my buddies.

I spent the next 10 days at home and reported back to Ord to begin my “tutoring” of new recruits. Upon completion of leadership school, I was automatically given the rank of Private First Class. As soon as I was assigned to duty, I was given temporary Corporal stripes. The first few weeks were going good for me. Amazingly, I had absorbed through osmosis, probably, everything the Army had tried to teach me. If I do say so, I was a good platoon leader. I always treated the recruits as human beings, but never let them get away with anything that wasn’t army regulation.

After only four weeks of being a Cadre, I along with all my buddies, were reclassified and received orders from “FECOM” (Far Eastern Command) – that really spells “Korea!” It seems that the war had turned and now 250,000 Chinese had crossed the Yalu River into North Korea, and our troops were being bushed back from Pyong Yang, capital of North Korea, to below the 38th parallel. The infantry had lost, and were still losing most of their “non-coms,” as well as thousands of foot soldiers. Anyone stateside, with some degree of special training, was being sent into combat to replace the NCOS and men who were becoming casualties. Boy, did I have a rude awakening.

CHAPTER 14

Some time in May of 1951, I was on a troop ship heading to the front lines of Korea. Our ship docked later, in Sasebo, Japan. We were put on a train to Camp Drake, just outside of Tokyo, for processing. After a few days, we were back on a train heading again for Sasebo. We sailed out of the port and across the Sea of Japan and landed, sometime later, at Inchon, Korea. Again, we were put on a train for several hours to a “repo-depot” (replacement depot) about 10 miles behind the front lines. We slept in tents for the remainder of that night and at daybreak, were put on army trucks and driven forward to where the fighting was. It all happened so fast that it all seemed like a bad dream.

While at Fort Ord, a couple of my buddies were Duane Mellinger and “Pete” Peterson. Duane was a deputy Sheriff up near Big Bear, California, and Pete was from Yucaipa, California. We had stayed together during basic training but got separated going to Korea. After a short time, the trucks loaded with replacements arrived at a clearing, a few yards behind the front line. We dismounted and walked up a small hill to a company of the 3rd division. I was assigned to easy company, 3rd regimental combat team of the 3rd division. Within the hour, I was signed in and sitting in a foxhole with some guy I had never seen before.

That night, the Chinese attacked us with great gusto. What I had dreaded for months had become a reality. They hit us with artillery and mortar fire for about an hour. Then, the foot soldiers began coming up the hill where we were dug in at the top, and preceded to fire furiously at us, lobbing hand grenades and potato mashers (a grenade that looked like an oversized auto piston). They were made out of wood, but had a devastating effect, if they exploded close enough to you. They were strictly concussion grenades.

Before I got to Korea, the boys on the front would put timber over their holes in the ground to keep the winter snow, sleet and rain out. But it seems that on many cold and freezing nights, GIs would fall asleep, even though the rule was three hours on and three hours off guard duty. They stayed in their foxhole and one would keep awake and be alert while the other got three hours of sleep. The overhead cover kept them dry and warm. So, many of the guys on guard would fall asleep and the Chinese would sneak up the hill and lob the potato mashers into the covered holes. The open space was so narrow that the guys couldn't get out fast enough. I understand that hundreds were killed or maimed during the previous winter.

General Van Fleet, who had replaced General Douglas MacArthur as commander of the 8th Army a short time before my arrival, ordered all overhead cover on foxholes permanently removed. So, my newfound friends whom, till then, I had never met, and I started returning the firepower with all we had. The battle lasted for about two hours and then silence. When it was over, I looked at my watch and it was 2 am. I realized that this had been my REAL “baptism by fire” and I was still in one piece. I said a silent prayer of thanks and told the guy next to me that I would take the next three hours of guard.

I was so emotionally high that I knew I couldn't sleep for hours. About an hour later, all hell broke loose – more incoming artillery and mortar fire. All I could do was stay down and keep my eyes open. After about twenty minutes, it all stopped as suddenly as it began. I said to myself aloud, “What the hell was that all about?” The voice of the guy in the darkened hole with me said, “That was cover fire so the Chinese could come back and pick up their dead and wounded.” I couldn't help but wonder how many, if any, of the enemy had I personally killed or wounded? When a group of men are coming at you in the dark, firing wildly and launching grenades, all you can do is return that fire with all you've got – self preservation, I think it's called. When I heard that they came back to claim their own, the thought struck me that these may be my enemy, but they are still caring human beings, just like us.

I had been wide awake since the attack and the time passed quickly, for my mind kept turning over and over, with thoughts of what am I doing here and will I ever get back home in one piece, or for that matter, even get off this hill at all? The next day, I slept as much as I could. My buddy, I can't even remember his name, was rotated, and left a few days later. I never saw him again.

The Chinese would only attack at nighttime. The only thing that we were concerned with, during day light hours, was occasional artillery and mortar fire. We were outnumbered about five to one, as I recall. However, the Chinese had limited weapons. On an assault, they would come up the hill to our positions in a long line. All or most of the soldiers had some sort of weapons. Generally, older rifles and some Russian made pieces. After the first line of the offense were killed or wounded, the second line would pick up their dead comrade's weapons and continue to battle up hill. Those without weapons would try to get close enough to us to lob the grenades. We were near the chosen reservoir and were pretty much dug in for the present.

The next few weeks were about like the first night, except when the enemy didn't attack, we would probe “no man's land” – the area between our lines and theirs. I was now squad leader and I would take my squad, every fourth time, to patrol the area. One day,

word came down to us that a task force with easy company, would move out (“spear heading”) at 4 am. And take hill “number” whatever. All the hills had numbers and I can’t remember those numbers because after a while, they all sounded the same to me. This would be my first OFFENSIVE encounter with the enemy since I got to the front line. None of us slept the night before – at least, I know I didn’t.

At exactly 4 am, under the cover of darkness, we moved out with our full combat pack and additional ammo for our weapons. This part of Korea was hills and rice paddies – nothing more. We moved slowly and silently through “no man’s land,” most of the time keeping our heads and rifles out of the muck of the paddies. Often times, we were walking in water up to our shoulder. There was little or no livestock in Korea, so there was little or no animal fertilizer. The rice farmers would use human feces in their paddies, so you can imagine what we were having to submerge ourselves in — paddy after paddy, for nearly a mile. We reached the base of the objective, just as the brass had planned, at daybreak.

Korea is called “the land of the morning calm” and this morning was no exception. It was very still, and serene as we quietly formed a line across the base of the hill and waited for instructions to charge up and, most likely, into oblivion. Suddenly, the serenity was broken with a loud voice yelling, “MOVE OUT!!” The two words that I had dreaded to hear became a reality.

The entire first line of the offensive began to move briskly up the hill. I kept my rifle at the ready and my eyes open. As we proceeded toward the top, about a quarter of the way up, all hell broke loose. Heavy artillery, mortar and rifle fire came raining down on us like thunder bolts from heaven. I froze, instantly, in my tracks, as did most of the others. I heard the Captain’s whistle blow and a voice screaming, “FORWARD MEN, FORWARD!!” We all started moving upward again, but this time, with our weapons blaring and our minds spinning.

About half way up the hill, I was still moving but, as I started to look around me, I saw some of our boys being hit and falling. I heard the Captain calling for artillery fire on his radio and he also was calling for air support. He was yelling into the mouthpiece, moving and firing at the same time. He was just a few yards in front of me and I could tell by the sound of his voice that we were in a lot of trouble and I knew it was going to get worse, the higher we climbed. All of a sudden, my feet stopped. I stood there, while some others passed me, continuing upward. I was frozen in time. I tried, with every fiber of my being to move, but I remained stationary. I heard voices saying, “MOVE IT OUT, SOLDIER! MOVE IT OUT!!” I could not force my body to respond. It seemed as though I was standing there for an eternity.

I was completely mesmerized by the sound of explosions and rifle fire. I suddenly said aloud, "Dear Lord in heaven, I don't have the courage to continue. If you want me to go on, you're going to have to take me up this hill, for I know that without your help, I'll never make it."

Instantly, I felt the "hand of God" on my back. I felt the gentle but strong force that propelled me forward. As I moved upward, I became aware of everything around me and I continued firing and moving forward. I remember, as though it were yesterday, the earth below me seemed to disappear and I felt as though I was being, literally, moved forward – standing on a soft cloud.

I have no recollection of my feet ever touching the ground until I arrived at the top. They say there are no atheists in a foxhole. But I will tell you, in no uncertain terms, that as a person who was taught from childhood that there is a God in heaven and firmly believed it, I now KNOW that He does exist. I know, for I asked and He answered. There was never a time, before or since that glorious encounter with the Almighty, that I have sensed that incredible feeling of His hand on my back and the sense of total composure and peace in my heart and soul. Take it from a man who has experienced the love of God not only spiritually, but physically. He was there. He is here. He is everywhere. I believe that I wasn't singled out on that cold wintry day somewhere on a hillside in Korea. I believe many other boys asked the Lord for strength and courage to make it to the top. Those who didn't make it, I'm sure knew that even though they asked and the Lord heard, He answered, telling them that it was their time to meet him and reap their rewards in Heaven. For are we, the survivors, the "lucky ones?" Or, is it God's way of giving the "unlucky ones" the early experience of sitting at His side and knowing eternal love and peace. For I believe that, no matter how precious life is, on Earth, the true joys and pleasures are when we meet our Father in Heaven.

The souls of these men and women who have given their young lives so that we can continue to live in peace are surely alive and secure in God's hands. Let us never forget them, for they never forgot us. They gave their last ounce of courage and devotion so that we could live in peace.

I stood on the top of that hill and looked around me. The toll we had taken was heavy. I still didn't know how long it took me to arrive at the top. I only knew that I was there. We dug in and in no time, the artillery started pounding us. As I recall, they kept it up most of that day. The Captain kept calling for air strikes against the big guns that continued to pound us, but thus far, no airplanes.

Sometime after noon, three Air Force fighter jets, armed with napalm bombs, screamed over our position and began blasting away at the hill to our north, where the big guns were located. The fliers dropped their payload and returned to their base in Japan. As I saw them dip their wings in a salute to us heading back to base, the thought crossed my mind that those guys would be eating hot chow and sleeping between sheets tonight.

Shortly after the air strike, the big guns started again. We later found out that the artillery was stored in a large cave. They were on tracks and were rolled out to fire and before the air strikes would start, the Chinese would roll them back into the cave and close the camouflaged doors, so the pilots couldn't spot them. After two days on the hill, we received orders to pull back to our lines. We lost many men during the two days of heavy artillery pounding. Now, we were pulling back and giving this blood-soaked piece of real estate back to the Chinese.

We had been told before our assault that the hill was important because the enemy was using it for an OP (observation post). When we left, I knew that they would once again occupy and use it for an OP. I began to wonder what this "police action" was really all about. We put our full packs on our backs and started to pull out. As we neared the bottom of the hill, we were hit with enemy fire from below. During the night the Chinese, using the rice paddies for cover, had silently surrounded the hill and were waiting for us at the bottom. As we returned their fire, we were suddenly being hit from the top of the hill and the Chinese were ascending the other side, as we were withdrawing.

We were completely cut off from our lines and started digging in on the hard, rocky, steep hillside. The Captain called for air strikes again, but to no avail. We were "sitting ducks" and no way to improve our positions. Somebody at "corps" heard the "old man's" SOS, for about two hours later, we saw a string of tanks coming toward us. They were traveling in single formation because the only solid ground was the narrow strip of earth that separated the paddies. The tanks were progressing slowly, but surely with their guns blasting the enemy at the bottom perimeter of the hill. The Chinese began to pull away to the reverse side and the tankers aimed their guns upward, to the advancing enemy coming down the hill. They too, started their retreat. The retreating soldiers continued to fire as we climbed atop the tanks and returned their fire.

The tanks had come to us in a single file. They had not enough solid ground to turn around, so they opted to reverse their tanks along the narrow strips of land. The first two or three tanks that tried to turn around slid off the path and into the paddies. Thank goodness most of us made it back to our lines in one piece – thanks to the terrific tank corp. We never saw an airplane, no matter how desperately the Captain

had requested them. Once back on our lines, I pondered why the Chinese only fought at nighttime. Who then, were all those Asians back on that hill?

Several weeks later, I was called in to the CO's (company commander) bunker. I left my "home in the ground" and entered the CO's quarters. I saluted and waited for a response. I did not receive one. Our CO was captain ITO, a "Nisei" (an American born of Japanese ancestry) and he was one gung-ho Army guy! He rose, walked over to me, looked up and threw a piece of paper in my face. I reacted with shock rather than surprise, because I was completely taken back. He said in a rather loud voice, "Pick it up!" I looked at him. "Pick it up I said... now!" he continued. I reached down to the dirt floor and retrieved the piece of paper. He said, "Read it!" I slowly began to read the letter and he said, "OUT LOUD!"

The letter said the following, as I recall, "Dear Sir, Cpl. Poindexter is a very talented young man. I have known the Cpl. for a long time and I sincerely believe that he could be far more beneficial to the service if he were placed in special services. He could keep up the morale of hundreds of service men, which I know is equally important to the success of the military. Signed sincerely, Bob Hope."

I was totally stunned after reading the letter. I had no previous knowledge of it whatsoever. The CO said, "The only way you will ever get off this hill, soldier, is to be carried off." He continued, "I served four years with the 442nd Go For Broke regiment. (That was a regiment of only Japanese Nisei soldiers who honored themselves by being one of the most respected fighting units in the Second World War.) I worked my way up to Master Sergeant and was denied a field commission three times, and do you know why? I had a Caucasian company commander and that son-of-a-bitch didn't like me, so he kept me back. "I don't like you," he said. "I don't care how many friends you have in high places. They can't help you here, as long as I'm in charge." I tried to explain that I had nothing to do with the letter from Bob Hope. However, he would not listen and dismissed me with much anger in his voice.

During the later 40s, I had met Charley Cooley, a personal friend and assistant to Bob Hope. Charley's girlfriend, Isabel, was in some of my stage shows, so Charley and I, along with Isabel, became good friends. I used to go to Bob's home in Toluca Lake, CA, and visit, many times – either on the set or in Bob's dressing room at Paramount studios. When I returned home sometime later, I found out that Charley heard that I was on the front line and went to Bob and had him write the letter.

I never told my good friend Charley that the letter nearly got me killed, because after the meeting with the CO, my squad began pulling patrol duty every night for a month. Army regulations, as I recall, were to rotate squads. We would probe – get involved

with their patrol, have firefights, duck their mortar and get back to our line. I finally went to see the CO and told him that I knew he was trying to get me killed, but he was jeopardizing the entire squad, not just me. I told him it was against regulations not to rotate the squads and if it continued, I would go to the IG (Investigating General). He said that he would court-martial me for insubordination and pull my stripes.

I figured that I had little to lose because down deep inside of me, I never thought that I was ever going home anyway. Anyway, the CO dragged his feet on my court-martial and a few weeks later, he had me transferred to another division which had been an all-black division, but the Army broke it up with a certain white ratio. I was one of them.

After months of fighting and having my company nearly wiped out three different times, I knew my luck couldn't hold out much longer. After getting hit in the knee with shrapnel, I was sent to a MASH hospital. While at the hospital, I ran into my buddy Duane Mellinger. He was a driver for Chaplain Wendall Beck. Capt. Beck was visiting the hospital and Duane and I renewed our friendship. Seeing Duane again rejuvenated me and I made a decision. I hitchhiked back to corps and with the wrinkled and soiled letter from Bob Hope in my gritty hands, I walked into the special service tent.

A Corporal asked me my business and I said I wanted to see the CO, and that it was personal. He went into the CO's quarters and momentarily, the Cpr. and another officer returned. The officer was a Major. A nice-looking man of about 40 or 45 years of age. He asked what he could do for me and I handed him the soiled letter. After reading it, he noticed the date, which was many months before, and questioned the time lapse.

I related the whole story of Captain Ito and of my trying to stay alive during the interim. He turned to the Cpr. and told him to bring his Jeep around. He told me to have a seat. He left the tent and about 20 minutes later the Cpr. returned from the motor pool with the Major's Jeep. The Major returned a few minutes later and told me to get in the Jeep. It was late afternoon and although it was early spring, the wind was still very cold. As I sat in the Jeep alone, I started wondering what on earth I had done. I had left without authority, so technically I was AWOL and I assumed the Major knew it for I didn't show him a pass upon arrival.

He came out of the tent with his heavy coat and climbed into the Jeep, never saying a word. We pulled out of the corps onto the MSR (main supply route) and headed north toward the front lines. As we drove, he introduced himself. He was ironically named Major Rifleman. He told me that he had just cut orders to have me transferred, bag and baggage, to his special service company. A sudden feeling of relief came over me as we continued the drive north. I wasn't really sure if he might not be taking an AWOL GI back to be court-martialed.

After we arrived back at corps with my baggage, he assigned me a bunk in the rear of the large tent that they called headquarters and told me to get some rest. He said that he would officially assign my duties tomorrow. This was the first night's sleep, inside and near a stove, plus clean sheets and blankets that I had experienced in nearly 12 months. I prayed myself to sleep after a few hours of lying there, convincing myself that this was truly happening.

The next morning I arose and dressed, walked into the front part of the tent which was the office. The Corporeal and the Major were sitting behind their respective desks, drinking coffee. The Major said, "Good morning, Sergeant. Have some coffee." As I was pouring myself a cup, I looked directly at the Major and said, "Sir, you will never know how grateful I am to you for believing in me... you probably saved my life." The Major just sipped his coffee and replied, "Hell, Sergeant, you've paid your dues. Besides, what can the Army do to me... I rotate back to the states, tomorrow... I guess we're both winners."

I will never forget Major Rifleman as long as I live, and even though we knew each other a little over 48 hours, he was truly a man who cared about me and didn't hesitate to do something for me. I, to this day, know no more about him than I did in that small space of time.

The executive officer was Lieutenant Chet Zabroski and the next day, the new CO, Captain Stewart G. Case, arrived. For the next few weeks, we grew together like one small happy family. Chaplain Beck and Duane would drop by for services at least once a week and Captain Case and I would play Hearts (the card game) with them. Week after week, we would always win. The Chaplain and Duane – no matter how much they played, always lost. Captain Case and I cheated. If either one of us got the Queen of Spades, we had a secret way of informing each other. Whoever had the Queen would scratch their right ear lobe. So we always knew not to take the "lady," as she was called.

Once we were playing and Captain Case and I knew that neither of us had the Queen, so we were playing accordingly. We kept leading them along until the right moment and Captain Beck, thinking that one of us had the Queen, trapped himself and his partner Duane gave him the lady. Captain Beck was so irritated that he yelled at Duane, "YOU GAVE ME THE SON-OF-A-BITCH!!" Captain Case and I fell on the floor, laughing our eyes out. When the good Chaplain regained his composure, he had a good laugh, too. We never told them about our little system until the day that I rotated back to the States. I think they forgave us.

The next couple of months were absolutely heaven, compared to the first nine. We would put on shows for the boys, show some of the latest movies (in 16mm) and had

a donut on wheels vehicle that would make daily rounds to all that was accessible. Working with Capt. Case and Lt. Zabriski was pure delight.

These men were both National Guardsmen, and even though they stuck strictly to the military code, they were like family. I always referred to them as “Sir,” no matter how informal we all were at times, and I respected these officers more than any others that I had served under. Occasionally, they might refer to me as Dex rather than Sgt., but only when we were alone or perhaps involved in a sport or card game.

After several weeks at special services, I was allowed to go on R&R (rest and recuperation) to Tokyo. I was entitled to the R&R months before while still in combat. That’s when you really needed it, but I never made it. Now it was my turn. I spoke with Chaplain Beck and he agreed to allow Duane Mellinger to go with me. So, after a truck ride down to Seoul, we boarded an Air Force plane and with about a dozen guys along with us, we took off for Japan.



Maury Dexter, Tokyo, Japan
January 7, 1952.

We were temporarily stationed at Camp Drake, just outside of Tokyo. Mel, as I called Duane, and I took a taxi into Tokyo and started “doing the town.” This was just seven years after WWII had ended, and Japan was starting to gather steam in the uphill battle of reviving their economy. As I recall, the yen was about 3.65 to the American dollar. Everything to us was dirt cheap. Among other things, a hotel, including a “lady in waiting” for 12 hours, was about \$5 American. As a 25-year-old male who had spent

over 10 months with a bunch of male compatriots, I must confess that I was ready for some “female companionship.”

The Japanese girls were totally professional. When you entered the hotel and made your wishes known, you were brought into a small anti-room by the Mama-San or Papa-San (hotel manager) where you took a seat, and the “manager” would hand you a book of matches. On one side of the book would be printed the name and address of the hotel. The other side was blank. You were instructed to hold the book of matches in your open hand so that the printed side was up. As they paraded the girls, three at a time, in front of you and as the one that you liked crossed, you were to simply turn the book cover over to the blank side, denoting your choice.

Well, after about six girls had walked thru the room, Mel flipped his match cover over on the fourth or fifth one. I was as eager as he, but also wondered how long the line of girls was. After about eight or 10 girls walked through, Mel finally said, “Let’s go, let’s go!!” I chose the next one and we were on our way upstairs to our respective rooms.

I entered the room and walked over to the window to view the Ginza, the main street in downtown Tokyo. The door opened and in walked the “chosen one” in a Japanese kimono and zodi’s. She told me, in broken English, to get undressed and put on the kimono that she had brought. I wasted no time getting undressed and she started to unlace the army dress boots that I was wearing. Once in the kimono, she opened the door and gestured for me to follow her.

We walked down the narrow hallway and entered a room at the end. Inside were two furos—bathtubs that were made out of concrete. They looked like a stall shower that had been sealed on four sides and then cut in half. After taking off our kimonos, I had to climb up a few steps to enter the tub, as did the girl. There was a seat on one side and as you sat, your body was sitting in extremely hot water, up to your neck. The water was so hot, I thought that I would pass out, but I endured. The tub had a small drain in the bottom and as the water drained out of the tub, an equal amount of hot water entered at the top so that the temperature always remained the same, hot.

After a half hour of scrubbing my body from head to toe, literally, she pointed to a shower and adjusted the water so as to cool me off. After the shower, we returned to the room and the rest was, shall we say, pure delight. After the “pure delight” was over, I experienced for the first and last time, the art of back walking. At first, I thought that she was going to break my back into pieces, but after a couple of minutes, it was truly ecstasy. Mel and I spent six terrific days and nights in Tokyo, pretty much seeing the town during the day and turning over match covers during the night.

After returning to Korea, I resumed my duties and about two months later, I received my orders to rotate. It was a mixed feeling, as I remember. Wanting desperately to go home, something that, for a long time before, seemed impossible to achieve and the thought of leaving my new found friends in Captain Case and Lt. Zabraski. We used to talk about the time when we would finally make it back to the States. Both of the officers were family men with several children and I knew what it meant to them to be in some God-forgotten place, helping to win a “police action” and wanting desperately to be with their wives and children. At least, I was still a bachelor and even though I only had my mom to come home to, it was more than enough for me.

I was driven to the port of Inchon, the same place that I landed over a year ago, and put on a ship with a few thousand other rotates, including my buddy Mel. Again, we were off to Sasebo, Japan, and onto a train to Camp Drake for reprocessing, and then on a train back to Sasebo. We were told that they had no transport available at that time, so we laid around the base for four or five days. We had our days free, but we had to answer roll call every morning at 7 am. It was a time of mixed emotions for me, for I liked seeing that part of Japan and being able to buy some Japanese goodies to take home, but I still counted the hours when I would be on my way home. We finally got our orders to sail.

There were 4,000 GIs crowded on a converted merchant ship that was built to accommodate only 2,400 men. Consequently, 40% of us were placed on the deck of this old tub while the other percentage was housed below, in bunks. I was one of the lucky ones. I got the top deck assignment. We were told to use our sleeping bags at night and that halfway through the voyage, we would exchange places with the men below.

About eight hours out of the port of Sasebo, we hit the tail end of a typhoon. The winds were fierce and the sea was so violent that the ship’s bow would rise 20 or more feet out of the water and go equal the amount below it. The captain said that he stopped the engines for fear that the strong ocean water would break a screw (propeller). We sat without power for at least 10 hours. The men above deck latched themselves to anything that was stationary so they would not be swept overboard. I tied myself to the railing of the ship’s stairs and thought that I would never survive this nightmare.

The ship sat there bobbing up and down like a toy in a violent storm. The men below were terribly seasick and most of the men on deck were, too. I’ve never seen so many green faces in my life. At least I was in the open and no matter the strong winds and cold ocean water, I thanked heaven that I wasn’t down below like a bunch of sardines without fresh air and in cramped quarters. Without exaggeration, I would say that 90-95% of the guys lost everything in their stomachs. It was not a pleasant sight or smell... to say the least.

After the storm moved on, the Captain announced that even though he had cut the engines and rode out the storm, one of the screws was cracked and that we would be going home at half speed – using only one good propeller. As I recall, it should have been about a five-day-and-night voyage to San Francisco. Now, however, at eight knots instead of 16, we would be almost double the time on the water. Sure enough, it took us nearly twice as long to get home. After the sixth day at sea, the kitchen started running out of food. They instigated a one-meal-a-day edict and that meal was primarily a thick soup or stew. Due to the 4,000 men on board, we would line up at 7 am, and the line would still be there at 9 pm. We also ran low on fresh water, so for the next several days, you could shower only with ocean water. The morale was incredibly low, and I could understand it. Here were 4,000 mostly front line fighting men who had already had their share of misery and now were forced to tolerate this. To me, it was the supreme insult. I decided to do something about it.

I spoke with the Colonel in charge of the troops and told him I wanted to put on a variety show for the boys. I would use whatever volunteers I could get aboard ship and put the show together. He agreed and the auditions were announced over the ship speakers and, in no time, I had over a hundred guys volunteering. I requested anyone who could sing, dance, play a musical instrument or do any form of entertaining. I put together, with another GI named Jimmy Mertes, a two-hour show that featured singers, dancers, musicians and comedians.

The following was an article that appeared in the ships paper named *The Phoenix News*:

“Last night, we sat in on the final rehearsal of the ‘special services variety review’ and we were amazed to find such great talent among the men aboard. It brought to our minds one thing, the army had ¾ of the top young musicians, singers and comedians in America today. These boys possibly didn’t know each other until they were put together on the Marine Phoenix and brought closer together when the announcement came out about the show. We had a little chat with Maury Poindexter and Jimmy Mertes, the two kingpins behind the arrangement for the show. They told us that there wasn’t anything to getting the review together with all talent to choose from aboard the ship.

They gave us the following information on the program and we are privileged to pass it on to you. The first performance is at 1830 hours tonight in the recreation room, at the bottom of ladder six, on “C” deck, and will be there at 1830 hours each evening until every compartment has had a chance to see and hear it. The troop commander suggested that it be run by compartments as the regularly scheduled movie at that time. Then, no one can complain that they didn’t get a chance to see it.”

Below is listed some of the terrific talent aboard the ship:

Jimmy Lyons, 45th infantry division from Holdenville, Ohio – Accordionist.

Eugene Ernst from St. Paul, Minnesota

Alex Warfield from Indianapolis, Indiana – Singer, banjo player

Fred Cavender from Decatur, Illinois – Comedian

Chuck Sloan from Plymouth, Indiana

Ernest Wigglesworth from Massillon, Ohio – Irish Tenor

Myron Rice from Sangabriel, California

Bob Kurowski from Mankato, Minnesota – Harmonists

Giuseppi Armato from Brooklyn, New York – Legitimate singer who had sung in Town Hall and Carnegie Hall

Bill Payton – Tap dancer, piano player, singer from New York City

A.V. Wall of Portales, New Mexico

The above musicians also “doubled in brass,” so to speak, as they provided the musical background for the show as well, along with Armand Archambault on drums and Everet Price on guitar. Duane Mellinger and John Simmons helped us with the technical aspect of the show. It still amazes me that somewhere in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, there was this amount of outstanding talent among these returning veterans. It really was one “hell of a good show.”

We were complimented by the ships captain and all the way down to the rest of the 4,000 men aboard.

CHAPTER 15

Several days behind our scheduled arrival time, we sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge into San Francisco Harbor. We all stood on deck and cheered as the ship continued toward its final berth. Boy, were we in for a shock! Due to the delay in our arrival, there was no berth available for our ship. Not only could we not dock, but there were no cheering crowds or marching band – not even a “Welcome home boys. You’ve done a good job!” banner. Nothing! We couldn’t even set foot on American soil. I stood there in total disbelief.

Here were thousands of war-weary, half-starved men and boys who hadn’t had a decent meal or a fresh-water shower for days, and now they tell us we will sail to Seattle, Washington, as soon as they take on fuel and supplies. You would think that before allowing our ship to sail all the way to the California coast and into San Francisco, they would have notified the ship’s captain that there was no berth available. We wasted at least another two days.

As far as I could see, there were no other military ships with returning veterans already berthed. This said a lot about how the fighting and dying Korean GIs were thought of. If I sound bitter, it’s because I sure as hell am.

We finally put into port at Seattle and began processing at Fort Lewis for our leave time. We were then put on trains headed toward Los Angeles and points north, east, south and west. These GIs were finally going home in four different directions.

I had not written Mom that I was on my way home. Knowing that she knew that I, no longer on the front line, was in no immediate danger, I wanted to surprise her. Upon arriving at Union Station in downtown LA, I called her and told her of my arrival. God bless her! I couldn’t make out too much of her conversation due to the sobs in her voice.

Mom had gone to work after I was drafted, for my measly allotment wouldn’t pay all the bills. I had sold the house in 1948 when we went to New York, so we were renting a house when I was inducted into the Army. A short time later, Mom answered an ad in the paper for a resident manager of a small apartment complex in Hollywood. She was hired, the first-ever employment in her life. Foster, Bill and Jimmy were all married and contributed little, if anything, to her care.

I spent 10 glorious days at home and then reported to Camp Roberts, California, to serve the three months I had left. Although the draft was for 24 months, they reduced the term to 21 months for all returning combat personnel. I was assigned to special services at Camp Roberts and settled in comfortably to await my discharge. I was able

to drive home every other weekend because I was the highest-ranking noncom in the unit. Our main job was to get as much entertainment as we could for the soldiers stationed there. Not only movies, but also stage shows and reviews which were put on on weekends. Through some of my Hollywood contacts, I was lucky enough to get some big named stars to entertain: Tony Curtis, Janet Leigh, Debbie Reynolds, etc.



Receiving my Bronze Star,
Camp Roberts, 1953.

Our company commander, Captain Wymer, had been booking a troupe from Hollywood, headed by a fellow named Hank McCune. Hank would bring up a group of singers and dancers every few weekends. He would MC the shows and do standup comedy routines. The first time I saw this revue, I thought it strictly from Dixie – amateur night at best. Hank was an exceptionally ingratiating guy, but the talent was from Hollywood talent schools, I believe—not really pros at all. Anyway, I suggested to the CO that maybe we could do better, but he said the boys like Hank and, after all, we don't pay him that much anyway. So let him continue. Hank's main claim to fame was a radio show originating out of LA in the late 40s and early 50s. I personally had never heard of him, but apparently, quite a few had.

The last time he came up with a show was about three weeks before my discharge. He gave me his card and said he was going to start a TV show in a few weeks, and if I ever needed a job to call him. I put the card in my wallet and thought, what a really nice person, but never seriously thought he would ever have his own TV show. Boy, was I wrong!

A young soldier named Kenny Miller walked into my office one day and inquired about getting into special services. He said that he had extensive experience in show biz. – singing, dancing, acting, etc. I thought for a kid who was only 18 years old and looked 16, how could he have so much experience? He was so insistent on auditioning that I finally relented and gave him one. The boy was truly talented and with help from Captain Wymer, got him transferred to our unit. A few weeks later, he was shipped out to Europe. But he stayed in touch with me and we've been good friends since 1952. I served the rest of my tour of duty at Camp Roberts and in September of 1952, was honorably discharged from the service ... Glory be, what a day!

CHAPTER 16

When I arrived back in Hollywood, where Mom was still managing the apartment complex, I decided to do what I assume every ex-serviceman does... take a long vacation. But the first thing I did was look up my ex-agent and “thrill” him with the news of my return to Showbiz. He was anything but thrilled, however, as TV had made great inroads into the entertainment field and the motion picture studios had begun cutting back on production. It seemed there were hardly enough jobs to go around – even for the well-known and seasoned actors – to say nothing of an actor who had been gone from the scene for nearly two years. In short, my agent not only wasn’t taking on more clients, but was actually dropping some from his active list. I was taken back to discover that it looked like my acting days were over at age 25.

As luck would have it, the man and his wife in the front apartment where I was now residing with Mom, was Frank Edmonds, an ex-casting director at a major studio who was laid off due to lack of production. Frank had become an actor’s agent, and when I told him of my background, he signed to represent me. I decided to forget the long vacation and try to start working for I knew it was going to be a long hard row to hoe and my mustering out pay wouldn’t last too long. I called all the friends I’d known before the service and started getting reacquainted. Frank was getting me work, but nothing substantial – a day here and a day there.

I didn’t like to see Mom working, even though she didn’t really mind very much. Through my GI Bill, I bought a new house out in the valley. It was miles from anywhere, but it was nice and new and I felt like I had a home again – I knew that Mom did, too. Now that I had recommitted myself to indebtedness, I knew I had to have a full-time job. Then the thought struck me... what about Hank McCune? Reluctantly, I fished his card out of my wallet and phoned him. A female voice informed me that Mr. McCune was not available and I could leave a message. I did. I told her who I was and, although I hadn’t seen Hank for a while, that he did ask me to call him. I hung up, thinking why waste my time. A short time later, that same day, Hank called me back. He apologized for not being available when I called, but said he was on set, shooting at the time. He explained that he had his own TV show, in which he was executive producer, actor and owner of the production. I almost fainted to hear this news, for so help me, I never thought he would ever pull something like this off. He gave me the address and said, “Come on over. I’d love to see you again.” I stood there for several minutes getting my thoughts together, then drove over to Hank’s little studio.

It was a converted supermarket on Western Avenue, just north of Sunset Boulevard. As I entered the one and only sound stage, I saw a small company of cast and crew, busy at work, shooting 16mm color film. Hank greeted me like an old friend, and introduced me to some of the cast. His co-star in the series was Hanley Stafford, the famous voice of Daddy on the big hit radio show *Baby Snooks* starring Fanny Brice. I also met Thurston Hall, one of the best-known character actors in the 1930s and 40s. The half-hour show was being, as I said, filmed on 16mm color film. It was the very first TV show to ever be put on film. All others up to that point, as far as I know, were either live or kinescope. Between scenes, Hank and I would talk. He finally broke the ice and came right out and asked me if I wanted a job. Without hesitating, I said, “Yes... Yes indeed!” He said he would start me next week – he needed a few days for the writers to create a new character for me. I was dumbfounded. Here I was, with so little faith in this guy and he’s going to create something so he can put me to work. The Lord sure works in mysterious ways.

The very next week, I reported to work. Hank had made me a character who moved into one of the cottages next to him. The premise of the TV show was that Hank lived with his uncle, Hanley Stafford, in a group of cottages. I believe Stafford was the landlord of the group of small, well-maintained units. Hank was always trying to help some of the tenants and always screwing everything up (sort of a “Helpful Henry” character). It was a cute premise and the supporting cast was terrific. Actors like Hanley Stafford, Thurston Hall, John Hoyt, Florence Bates, et al. Hank, being the central character, was always on. He didn’t know what subtle comedy was and seemed to overdo everything. We worked with some very well known comedy directors such as Charles Barton and Les Goodwins, but none of them really held Hank down. We were only in about a half-dozen markets around the country, so the dollar return wasn’t enough to keep the series out of the red.

The financial backer was Andy Burger, a large automobile dealer out of Kansas City, Missouri. He was a huge man and threw his weight around all the time when he was in Hollywood. He kept threatening to pull out of the losing series, but Hank’s gift of promotion kept Andy involved. The story I was told is that on a plane trip NYC, Hank met Andy’s sister and sold her on the idea of the series. She, in turn, talked brother Andy into financing the show. Hank surely could sell ice to the Eskimos. After several weeks went by, I realized that the \$80 per week wasn’t enough to support Mom and me. I sold the Reseda house and Mom took a position as resident manager of a brand new apartment house on De Longpre Street in Hollywood. The manager’s apartment was a two-bedroom, so it worked out fine for the two of us. The complex was about 20 units with a large swimming pool in the middle of it. I agreed to do minor maintenance

and clean the pool once a week. The apartments were located about one block south of Santa Monica Boulevard and about a half-block east of Normandy Boulevard. It took me just minutes to get to the small studio on Western Avenue.

After several months on the show, I confronted Hank with the fact that I couldn't live on what he was paying me. He instantly said, "Okay. I'll pay you another \$80 per week to be my dialogue director." (That's a technical term meaning helping someone learn their lines by rehearsing them over and over.) So I became actor and dialogue director at \$160 per week. A short time later, while the director was rehearsing the cast, the production manager, Jack Vaughn, came on the set and began telling Hank something about costs for an exterior location Hank had seen and planned to shoot in a few days. I missed the first part of the conversation, but the men's voices began to rise and I heard Jack say words to the effect, "if you can do any better, you do it!" McCune countered with something like, "Anyone can do better than you!" With that, Jack said some unpleasant things – turned, walked toward the stage door, and without turning back said, "I QUIT!!" Hank was left standing in the middle of the set, alone, and the silence was deafening. Before Jack reached the door, Hank yelled, "You can't quit, YOU'RE FIRED!" Jack stopped, looked back and yelled, "I QUIT!! YOU ALL HEARD ME... I QUIT... I've been in this business for over 30 years and I've never been fired in my life... If you tell anyone you fired me... you... SOB, I'll knock you head off!!" With that, he turned, slammed the door behind him and left Hank still standing while the cast and crew just sat waiting for Hank to say something.

I was sitting very close to Hank and as he looked around, trying to save face, he saw me and loudly declared, "YOU'RE THE NEW PRODUCTION MANAGER... LET'S GET THIS SHOW ON THE ROAD." Everyone started moving, doing their work, but I just sat there with an opened mouth – dumbfounded, again.

When the day's shooting was complete, I told Hank I knew nothing of production managing, and he said – still upset about Vaughn's quitting, "Neither did he. There's nothing to it." I reminded him that even though he was an independent company, he had signed contracts with the Hollywood union and one of them was the Directors Guild. Even I knew I would not be legal in that capacity. He said that Jack Vaughn was a first assistant director/production manager combination – that the DGA had no jurisdiction over production managers. He told me to call the Directors Guild and hire an assistant director and I was to function as PM. Reluctantly, I called the Guild, for we had to have an assistant director before we could continue shooting the next day. I spoke with Morrie Abrahms at the Guild and told him to send over a first assistant director, first thing in the morning. He asked me who I would like and I didn't have

an answer. He suggested that he read me some names from the availability list. About halfway into the Ks (the list was alphabetical), I said, "Read that last name again." Morrie re-read the name, Harold E. Knox. Don't ask me why, but I liked the sound of that name. Somehow, it sounded strong and experienced. Before I could comment, Morrie said, "There are still about a hundred more names to go." I said, "Send over Knox tomorrow."

I got into the studio early the following morning, but Harold E. Knox was already waiting for me. We went into the office and I asked him to have a seat. I was very impressed with Harold the moment I saw him. He certainly lived up to the image I had when I heard his name. He was an imposing man of at least six feet, and sturdy without being heavy. He was what you could call good-looking without being handsome. I put my cards on the table. I told him what had happened with Vaughn and how in a moment of Pique, Hank had given me this job — a job I knew absolutely nothing about. He smiled and said, "With me here, you don't have to worry... I know enough for the two of us... I'll teach you as we go along. Just don't be afraid to ask questions about what you DON'T know." I stood, thanked him and shook his hand. That meeting turned out to be the start of a close working and personal relationship that lasted for many years to come.



With dear friend Irene Ryan (Granny from *The Beverly Hillbillies*), 1958.

Harold was married to Irene Ryan, a comedienne, singer and dancer. She worked some of the top nightclubs in the country, including Las Vegas. She later became “Granny” on *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Over the next few years, I was invited to their home many times and I really fell in love with Rennie, as she called herself. We became very close friends.

For the next couple of years, we continued filming the series until Andy Burger pulled his financing and the show came to an abrupt halt. We were all on our way to the unemployment office, including McCune.

CHAPTER 17

The year was 1954 and the industry as a whole was in really bad shape. The majors were producing very little product, and the TV networks had very little going, also. I sat at home for several months drawing my unemployment check. With that and Mom's job giving us rent and utilities free, I made out for a while.

One day Hank called and told me to come see him. He was now located in another converted supermarket up on Argyle Street, behind the Pantages Theater. The studio was the brainchild of Ted Allen, one of Hollywood's most acclaimed still photographers. He and his wife Jean were running the place. When I arrived at the studio, Hank told me he was going to shoot a feature film. I thought, Sure... where will he get enough money to produce a full-length feature? Lo and behold, he pulled it off! I don't recall, but I think he got Andy to finance it. I called Hal Knox and fortunately he was available.

A writer who'd done several scripts for Hank's series had been hired to write the screenplay, from an idea that McCune outlined to him. The writer's name was Russ Bender, a man who would later become one of my favorite writer/actors and close friend. Russ told me later that the day Hank McCune told him the "story" he wanted Russ to write, he got to the middle of the plot and asked Russ what he thought of the idea. Russ replied, "Where's the ending? How do you solve the problem?" Hank replied, "That all comes in the SCREENPLAY."

Fortunately, Russ was good enough to write a very successful ending. The picture was originally entitled *A Life At Stake*, but subsequently changed to *The Key Man*. It starred Angela Lansbury, Keith Andes and Brian Keith, and was directed by actor/director Paul Guilfoyle, whom I had met when we did *Sweetheart Of Sigma Chi* together. We shot the feature and as I recall, it did fairly well. A year later, Hank made another feature, entitled *Wetbacks* (1956) starring Lloyd Bridges, Nancy Gates and Barton MacLane. I also had a small part in it.

The year was 1956. During the time between films, I worked as sort of a manager of the studio. Burger had invested in the place and became principal stockholder through the insistence of either Ted Allen or Hank, or both. They talked Andy into furnishing the one-stage studio with equipment – including a sufficient amount of expensive lighting equipment. The theory was to make the studio a rental space for independent producing companies. I worked at the place from 8 am until 5 pm, six days a week, trying to get producers interested in the facility. There was never enough interest, however, to make it a paying proposition, and in 1956 Andy dumped it, along with McCune, Ted Allen and all of Hollywood.

CHAPTER 18

During the next several months, I was unemployed again, even though I had learned a lot about production. I couldn't get a job because I wasn't in the union. The DGA at that time was a closed shop. I was told the only way into the Guild was to be a director's son or have someone in the Guild recommend you, and you still had to have experience in production. In other words, it was virtually impossible to get in. I tried in vain to get some work in production, but no luck.

One day, Jimmy Lloyd called and wanted to come by. I hadn't seen Jimmy for quite a while and said "Great! Come on over!" He told me of an idea he had for a daytime TV show. He explained it to me and I thought it was a good idea – so over the next couple of weeks, the two of us developed it. We pooled our money and had a beautiful prospectus put together for presentation. The show was entitled *Mother's Day*. It was designed to compete, in direct competition, with *Queen For A Day*, one of the hottest daytime shows. Knowing we needed a competing network for the project, I took it to ABC in Hollywood. I met with the program director at ABC, outlined the idea of the show, and he liked the idea instantly. I left the complete brochure with him and he said he would look at it and get back to me.

The show's premise was built around a panel of baby experts – a pediatrician, child psychologist, professional nutritionist, etc. They would ask questions of new mothers with their firstborn baby who must be under the age of six months. The questions were basic and sometimes humorous regarding feeding, bathing and general care of a mother's firstborn. The thing that was great about the show was that there were no losers. The four women who were interviewed were judged on a sliding scale and the so-called "winner" would return later to be pitted against the other winners to be chosen *Mother Of The Year on Mother's Day*. She would be given all or more things than the "Queen For A Day." The losers would receive gift items from baby manufacturers – from free diaper service for X amount of time, baby food for X amount of time, etc. So everyone won something. It was a relatively inexpensive show because, unlike most giveaway shows, there were no cash prizes – but a vast amount of sponsored products.

Jimmy and I waited a few weeks and I called the program manager at ABC. He was in a meeting – would call back. He never called. Two weeks later, same reply. About two months later, I went to ABC and told the manager's secretary I wanted to see him, or I would pick up my project. He was in a meeting, but the secretary said the project was at the ABC headquarters in NYC and he had not heard about the status of same.

About three weeks later, I'm sitting at home reading the TV section of the paper when, all of a sudden, something jumped out at me like a bolt of lightning. In the same time slot as *Queen For A Day*, it read, "*Mother's Day*, a new show from ABC starring Dick Van Dyke." I truly thought I would drop dead. I had heard of these things happening – big companies stealing projects from poor unsuspecting creators, but I could not believe it was happening to me and Jimmy Lloyd!

As soon as I told Jimmy of the outright plagiarism by ABC, we both looked at the show and their premise was over 90% our premise. Neither of us had any money, but Jimmy had a friend who was a lawyer, so we hired him on a "if we win, you get paid" arrangement. The lawyer instantly filed a cease and desist against ABC and filed papers to sue for plagiarism, etc.

About a week later (or five or six shows later, as these were daily shows), ABC pulled the show off the air with no explanation. Our lawyer went after them for plagiarism and damages, but ABC stated that they did not own the show. They were only the outlet for it. We found out later that they took our format and hired a couple of people to form an independent company and submit it. This would keep their skirts clean and we had to go after the small independent company that had absolutely no assets. Clever, huh?

Thirty years later, I'm working with Dick Van Dyke on a *Highway To Heaven* episode and asked him if he remembered the show *Mother's Day*. He said "Yes, but how did I remember it, for it only ran a few days, years ago." I asked him if he knew the real reason the show was jerked off the air and he replied, "No." After telling him the above story, he was not really surprised. Things like this happened a lot, I understand.

CHAPTER 19

After that terrific letdown, I received a call from Hal Knox. He was working on a low-budget Western feature for Robert L. Lippert. Lippert was an independent producer of small features and also one of largest independent motion picture theater owners in the nation. Hal asked me if I'd been working and when I told him "No," he said, "Come over and see me tomorrow." He was preparing a script that was to shoot in about a week at another converted market soundstage out on West Pico Boulevard.

When I arrived there the next morning, Hal was in a small office in the rear of the stage. He said that he knew things had been rough for me, but that this was his first job in months. He told me that he didn't have a dime in the budget to hire me as his assistant, but if I wanted to work on the "QT," he would pay me a few dollars a week out of petty cash. We both knew it was unethical, but I sure needed the money and he sure needed the help. I buried my conscience and thanked Hal for the Job.

I began working that day. The small office had two desks in the room. One was a small one in the corner by a window. As I sat down, I looked up and saw several spiderwebs along the window frame and realized I had just sat into a large web that now was hanging on my shoulders. Hal came over and removed it from me and we both had a good laugh about how we had moved up in the business. In the years to come, when I would get a little irritated with Hal, he would just smile and brush the imaginary spiderwebs off my shoulders. We continued to talk about that for years.

I can't recall the name of the film or who was in it, but for some strange reason, I remember the name of the cameraman, Gil Warrenton. When shooting started, Hal told me to stay in the background and if I ever saw Bill Maginetti, the company's production head, to take a hike. He described Bill and said he would drop by at least once a day during shooting and he must not know that I am working on the show. Early morning, of the first day of production, I was on the set and I saw someone who looked like Maginetti (as Hal had described him) coming in the stage door. I quickly went into the background and stayed there until he left. This routine happened every day of the shoot. I always got a jump on his seeing me and knew that, so far, I was avoiding his sight. The three weeks I worked really helped me financially, and I was sorry to see it end.

The last day of shooting, Hal told me to come into the stage, the next day, and help him clean up a lot of paperwork. He would pay me for the one day additionally. In the late afternoon of the next day, Hal needed some signatures from Maginetti, so he told me to take the paperwork over to Lippert's offices on Robertson Boulevard and have Bill

sign them. I said, "What about my going there? I'm not supposed to be working here." Hal said that he didn't want to wait for a messenger service so, tell Bill that I was the messenger.

I drove to the offices and walked into Bill's office and told the secretary I was a messenger and had some papers that needed Mr. Magginetti's signature for Harold Knox. She told me to be seated, that Bill was in a meeting but should be finished soon. As I sat in the office wondering what kind of person Bill Magginetti was, his office door opened and Bill and a man walked into the area. They exchanged goodbyes and Bill started to return to his office. When his secretary announced me, Bill said, "Come on in."

We entered his office and he said for me to sit down as he took the papers from me and sat behind his desk. He perused the papers and began signing them. Without looking up, he said "How long have you been working with Harold?" I almost fainted. I sat there like a statue and couldn't find the right words to answer. I was literally paralyzed. I knew that no matter what I said, I was sure to get Hal in a lot of trouble. So I chose my words carefully and answered, "Harold who?" Bill continued to sign the papers and he said, still without looking up, "What do you plan to do now that the picture is wrapped up?" I stuttered and said something to the effect of, "What do you mean?" Before I could continue, he said, "I know you've been assisting Harold, for the paperwork has been excellent and even though Harold is good, yours is better. Besides, I have seen you on the set from day one." All I could think of was poor Hal, not only am I out of a job, but so is he and they may make us repay the money even though I worked my tail off for it.

Bill got up and handed me the paperwork and said, "We have just signed a seven-year contract with 20th Century Fox Studios to make 20 features a year, and I really need an executive production assistant. Are you interested in working with me?" Again, I was dumbfounded. I uttered "Yes sir, Mr. Magginetti... yes, sir. I sure would." He said, "Alright, when you finish wrapping up with Harold, you can start here – for I need someone right away." I replied, "I'm all wrapped up." He said, "Okay, come on in tomorrow morning around eight and we'll discuss salary." When I returned to the sound stage and told Hal what had transpired, he was as elated as I was. I tell you, that was one of the happiest days of my life. I must confess that to this day, I don't know how it all happened, but I thank the Lord it did.

CHAPTER 20

I started my new job the following day with Magginetti. He taught me how to use the company's chart of accounts in order for me to relieve him of a lot of paperwork. I would sit with him for a couple hours a day and learn the categories of the invoices and then enter them into the chart of accounts. This way, with the final wrap of each production, the amount entered in each department would reflect the actual cost of that department, as well as the final figures for the overall budget.

After a couple weeks doing paperwork, Bill suggested that I "drop in" on at least one of our shows that were shooting around town. We had as many as three or four filming at the same time, at different locations around Hollywood. The productions were all shooting at independent sound stages because we could not afford to shoot at 20th Century Fox, due to the high cost of rental and overhead they charged. Even though we were entirely financed and released by Fox, we were entirely independent of the studio. The only stipulation production-wise was that we had to give Bausch and Lomb screen credit on each film for CinemaScope camera lenses, as well as being charged back to Fox, \$3,000 of each budget.

Each time a film would start shooting, one of our assistant camera crew would go to the camera department at Fox and check out a complete set of lenses for their particular production. The process was fairly new – having been used for the first time just three years earlier for the film *The Robe* (1953). It was an anamorphic lens with a standard lens on the cameras. The anamorphic lens was attached to the front of the standard lens so it required two first assistant cameramen, instead of one first assistant and second assistant. Both assistants had to follow focus on each lens. It took about 15 minutes each time you changed lenses due to the calibration of each lens. Due to the wide angle of CinemaScope, you seldom did close ups, per se. The tighter the lens, the more it fell off on the sides and the actor would begin to "Chipmunk" (the cheeks would start to puff out). Most directors would stage a scene, not unlike a stage production, in order to take advantage of the extreme wide angles of the lens.

Anyway, I started dropping by the stages that were shooting, checking to see if everything was okay. I knew most of the production crew as I, along with Bill, would run the production meeting during preparation just before going into production.

A couple of months later, Lippert moved our headquarters to a new building in Culver City, directly across from MGM Studios on West Washington Boulevard. It was a two-story building with one large and one extra-large penthouse on top. The extra-large one, of course, was R.L. Lippert's. To digress for a moment, when Lippert was making

his small-budget films, he also set up his own distributing company and was doing very well financially, but when he set up a TV distribution company to distribute these films, he refused to pay any residual payments (royalty payments) to the directors', writers' or actors' guilds. The guilds blacklisted him and he could not hire any of the above. The LATSE (crew union) backed the guilds and Lippert was out of business – personally, that is.

The story I was told is that Ed Baumgardner was loan officer for the motion picture division at the downtown branch of Bank Of America. He and Bob Lippert became friendly during the many negotiations Bob had with the bank in regards to the loans that were made on Bob's films. When Bob negotiated with Skouris at Fox to produce all the second features for the studio, Bob lured Ed Baumgardner away from Bank Of America and named him president of a newly-formed company, Regal Films Inc. Although Ed signed all of the contracts with all of the unions, Bob was actually running the company and making all the financial decisions. The unions knew about this, but couldn't stop him, even if they wanted to. Ed was a nice "banker type" of guy, but of course knew absolutely nothing about production.

We had been at our new offices about a week when one morning, as I arrived for work, I passed Lippert leaving the building and said, "Good Morning." He said nothing. A few steps later, I heard, "Hey you... do you work here?" I stopped, turned toward him and answered, "Yes, I do." He replied, "Since when?!" I was somewhat taken back because in all the time I'd been working with Bill, I had never really been physically close to Bob. I said, "For several weeks." He asked, "What do you do?" I replied, "I work for Bill Mogginetti." He turned, walked back to the second-floor stairs and said, as he passed me, "The hell you do!!" He disappeared up the stairs, leaving me wondering what happened.

I walked into one of the editing rooms on the first floor and made small talk with an editor. When I saw Lippert's car pull out of the side parking lot a little later, I went slowly up the stairs to Magginetti's office – which was across the hall from mine. As I walked in to see Bill, I knew he was going to have to fire me even though I'm sure he didn't want to. Bill said "Good morning. How were things at the stage? What time did they get their first shot?" I said, "8:45. They had some camera problems, but they corrected them and everything is okay now." He said "Good" and returned to his paperwork. I stood there a few moments and finally said, "Did Lippert talk to you?" Bill said, "Yeah... Oh, I see what you mean. Don't worry about Lippert. You work for me." Relieved, I said, "Thanks, Bill. I really need this job." He replied, "Thank you. I really need you... by the way, you're doing a great job."

After a year of working with Bill, and visiting our companies in production, I had learned more about filmmaking than most people learn in several years. Magginetti was a past master of production budgeting and control and Hal Knox was equally a master at putting crew together and getting the job done right, and on budget. I would have been a complete moron not to learn from two men like these.

I started going to the executive board production meetings in Lippert's office. The first time I was present, they were at an impasse, and Lippert addressed me for my opinion on the production matter. (The producer, director, writer, Hal Knox – and as the production manager/first assistant director, Bill Magginetti were all present.) When Lippert said, "What about you, kid... what do you think we should do?" (He called me kid until the day I left the company, years later.) I thought for a moment, knowing that what I was going to say would be against Lippert's opinion – which had already been expressed, as well as most of the others. I said, "Bob, I think so forth and so on." To my great surprise, Bob didn't wince when I called him by his first name – and further, he changed his opinion and agreed with my suggestion.

Magginetti was somewhat intimidated with Bob. He always referred to him as Mr. Lippert, never Bob. Lippert respected Bill for his expertise, but would always raise his voice to him if he disagreed with Bill or got upset with him. Lippert loved to throw a big shadow over everyone in his employ. I figured that the only way to really be honest with him, was to meet him on the same level, not as a boss-employee relationship, but as one human being to another. I had broken the ice with Lippert and he seemed to appreciate it. I was nonetheless well aware that I was putting my job on the line by being forward enough to address him on a one-to-one basis. I could not bring myself to call him Mister Lippert, when at that time, I had little regard for him, the way he treated Magginetti. It was a calculated risk, but I took it and was happy I did.

As we left the meeting, Hal Knox and I were the last into the hallway. As the others walked in front of us, Hal glanced over at me as we walked side by side, and silently brushed the invisible cobwebs from my shoulder. I smiled broadly and so did he. It was his way of saying "You've come a long way, kid, from that little cobweb-filled office, in just a little over a year." I got the message and we joked about it over the years. Because Hal was so good at his job, and also because Bill liked him as I did, he worked continually for the company over the next several years.

CHAPTER 21

We were shooting as many as 20 films a year and I would always see to it that Hal got the “pick of the litter” of scripts. We also had several other production manager/assistant directors working for us during those days. They were all first-rate production men with years of experience in their field. By name: Frank Parmenter, Herb Mendelshon, Clarence Eurist, Ralph Slosser and more. We hired directors of photography such as Floyd Crosby, Daniel Haller, James Wong Howe, Kenneth Peach, Ed Cronjager and Joe Birocletal – all top-flight cameramen, some Academy Award winners.



With Mara Corday and Jody McCrea on the set of *Hanging Judge* (released as *Naked Gun*), 1956.

We were churning out a feature every few weeks that included subjects such as adventures, thrillers, Westerns, Civil War and some science fiction like *Kronos* (1957) and *The Fly* (1958). (Kurt Neumann directed the last two.) By 1957-58, we started getting some “wanna-be” producers and directors. I referred to them as “sons of the pioneers,” as they were all sons or at least related to someone high up in the industry.

Spiro Skouras sent us his son Plato and his nephew Charles to learn the producing end of the business. Charles got involved with one production and decided the theater business was for him, so he left. Plato stayed on to produce a few films. He aligned himself with an ex-editor turned director, at Fox – James B. Clark. The production department and our production managers really produced these shows, but Plato was a quick learner and after several films, he proved to be an apt producer.

In 1958, Hal Knox, the art director John Mansbridge, Plato Skouras, James Clark and yours truly, went on location to Mexico to shoot two films back to back. One was *Sierra Baron* (1958) starring Brian Keith, Rick Jason and Rita Gam. The other was *Villa!* (also 1958) with Brian Keith, Cesar Romero and Rodolfo Hoyas. We were shooting at the Cherabusco Studios in Mexico City as well as locations outside of the city. Mansbridge, the art director, had finally, after much prodding the director, decided on a beautiful location to build the Western town for the shows. A few days before the start of principal photography, an unseasonable storm hit that part of Mexico, exactly where the newly-finished town stood. Many of the false front buildings were knocked down or destroyed. Poor John had to work his crew overtime to facilitate the shooting schedule even though I think Knox revised it somewhat.

Another time, when we were filming *Villa* on location outside of Cuernavaca, we were using an old narrow-gauge train. The director, Clark, had picked a beautiful, small valley where the train tracks ran down the middle of the terrain. The camera was positioned on the rise above the valley to take advantage of the 'Scope as the train made its way along the narrow tracks. Because we were shooting in CinemaScope, the wide angle lens would take in almost the whole valley and hills behind.

Clark had staged the scene so that as the train entered right frame, a group of *Villa's* riders would enter below frame and ride out to the center of the valley and stop the train, in a holdup attempt. As the train awaited its cue to start and the riders were ready to go, someone noticed smoke rising on the opposite side of the valley. The locals were making charcoal, but it looked like a series of Indian smoke signals. Hal told our Mexican assistant director to send someone over to the other side and pay the locals to put out their fires for a few hours. The Mexican assistant said okay. We all determined the approximate time it would take to have several riders ride across the valley and up the other hillside to stop the fires so Hal told the assistant to have the three riders stay there for at least an hour because we could get the master shot without having to wait for them to ride back into the shot. Knowing it would be at least an hour before the riders could reach the fires, most of us walked back up the hillside to our base unit and waited. About an hour later, the Mexican assistant director came up and told us the fires were out. We went back down to the camera and started getting everyone and everything ready to shoot. We'd already lost several hours in getting things organized for the first shot of the day, but now we were ready. *Villa's* men were mounted and in position, the train was ready to roll, but when Brian Keith asked for his horse, they couldn't find it.

Brian had already been established as riding the only pure white horse in the film, but now that horse was gone. We discovered that the Mexican wrangler had sent the horse with the others, over to put out the fires. Hal blew his top. "Why in heaven's name would you send the star's white horse when you had over 200 others to pick from?" he shouted at the wrangler. The wrangler replied, through our interpreter, "He's the fastest, Señor." We lost another two hours waiting for the "fastest horse" to return.

We had made a deal with the commanding general of the Mexican army to employ 200 Mexican cavalry soldiers with their horses to work in the film on location shooting near Cuernavaca for one week at X amount of pesos per day, per man and per horse. The above story of the white horse situation was the first day of our location shooting. Five and a half days later, Saturday, at noon, we wrapped, had lunch and prepared to move everything back to Cherabusco Studios in Mexico City for the remainder of the day.

The afternoon before, Friday, Hal sent a Mexican driver back to Mexico City with a bank draft to get thousands of dollars worth of pesos in order to pay off the soldiers. The driver spent the night in the city, and as soon as the bank opened in the morning, he withdrew the large sum and headed back to our location – about two hours outside the city. Several miles before reaching us, he was involved in an attempted robbery. As he approached the crest of a hill, five banditos stepped out in front of his car and waived him to stop. They were all waving large Bolo knives. He said "No way, Jose!" and stepped on the gas – driving right through the middle of the group. They all jumped out of the way, but the driver arrived at our location with a Bolo knife sticking out of the driver's side door – just below the side mirror. It was imbedded about four inches into the metal. Only a few of us knew about the money coming back to us, so it was a forgone conclusion that one of our so-called Mexican assistants was involved.

We set up our company auditor at a small table at the end of the chow line and every soldier came by and signed for the money due him and his horse for six days. Each man took his pesos and rode back to where they had been bivouacked for the last week. In spite of the first day's delay with the fires and white horse, we were right on schedule as we prepared to move back into the studios for Monday's shoot. During the late morning hours on Monday, as the company continued to film on stage, there was a very loud commotion at the interior stage door. Loud voices continued over the stage interrupting our shooting. Before I could make my way where the outbreak was, the commanding general of the Army, with several aides, came stomping onto the set. He was irate and yelling in Spanish at the top of his lungs.

When we finally got our interpreter to calm him down, we discovered that the thousands of dollars in pesos should have gone directly to him, not the soldiers! I knew the political system in Mexico was rotten, but I found out the military was, too. The general demanded full pay for himself. We suggested that he get the money back from his troops, but we were told he wasn't going to cause a small revolution over something that was rightfully his in the first place. We told him it was our understanding that we pay X amount of money for the troops plus their horses and that's exactly what we did... our skirts were clean... we have signatures for all the money that was agreed upon. We stood firm and the general and his aides stormed off the stage, saying "You will pay! You will pay!!" Later that day, we were notified by the Sindicato – the Mexican film union – that the general said that unless we paid the full amount he would prevent us from shipping any exposed film out of his country, period. In other words, we could continue shooting, but the exposed film and negatives would not get through their customs. WE PAID!

Several nights later, Hal and I were dining at one of the many fine restaurants downtown and we ran into Benedict Bogeous, who was shooting a feature there, *Journey To The Center Of The Earth*, starring James Mason and Pat Boone. He said he had hired the narrow-gauge railroad several weeks before and was curious as to how much we paid per day for the train. When we told him, he said "WOW!" I paid almost half that. Who is your Mexican production manager?!" The PMs make all the deals in Mexico with the various merchants, because under the rules of the Sindicato, they are the only ones with authority. When we confronted the Mexican production manager with the fact, he denied that he had kept the difference in what Bogeous paid and what we paid for the same train. We had our Mexican auditor find out how much the rail people charged and our suspicions were correct. The PM had pocketed the difference. We fired him and demanded that he leave the set and never return. The sindicato, said "No way," you can not fire him as he is a member and only we can fire him and we refuse to do so. (Love Mexico!) Anyway, we managed to keep him off the set even though he was still being paid by us. Fortunately, we only had a few days left on our schedule.

The Mexican's wanted to throw us a wrap party at someone's house, as opposed to the stage, so we all went to this very nice home in an upscale neighborhood of Mexico City. As we walked in, we saw most of the local people who had worked with us, as well as a group of musicians and, of course, the cast and crew. It was a first class affair with plenty to drink and plenty of delicious Mexican food. Someone touched my arm in the crowded room and as I looked, I saw it was the Mexican production manager that we tried to fire. He thanked us for coming and said how privileged he was to

have us in HIS home. We were flabbergasted! Our auditor pulled me aside and said, "Please stay... it would be a great insult if you all left." I said, "What about the insult of stealing our money?" He said, "In his heart he didn't steal the money... he only took it so the Mexican cast and crew could throw a big party to thank all of you." They could not afford such a special party, so he wanted to help out by supplementing the cash he took. I was so angry, but I couldn't help feeling a tug at my heartstrings, thinking how perverse their thinking was, but at the same time, how good their hearts were. We stayed and had a joyous evening. Something I will never forget.

CHAPTER 22

By 1959, we were in our third year of production and had already shot close to 60 films. We were out-producing the studio at Fox. Skouras finally told Lippert to start cutting back on the number of movies we were producing, no matter what the terms of our seven-year deal was. I had been in charge of production on nearly half of the films to date — somewhere around 30 in number. Magginetti was supervising the rest, a number even to mine, if not greater.

We had acquired several more “sons of the pioneers” during that time, and one such person was Hubert Cornfield, son of the head of Fox’s distributions in Europe, I believe. Hubert had been educated in Europe and even though this wasn’t quite the 60’s yet, Hubert was one of the forerunners of the avant-garde. He had read a book and wanted to write the screenplay and direct it. His only experience in filmmaking was an experimental short subject based on the color red. He told me he shot hundreds of feet of color film using nothing but objects with the color of red. He must have discovered or painted every shade of red imaginable.

When he came to America, namely Hollywood, through some studio connections, he got Billy Wilder to view his film. After some time elapsed, he finally reached Wilder and asked if he had viewed his film. When Wilder said he had sent it, Hubert asked him what he thought of his film. Without hesitation, Wilder replied, “Next time, try four different colors.” End of conversation. So help me Mitch Miller, Hubert told me that true story on himself.

Lippert bought the film rights to the book that Hubert had read and Hubert began adapting the screenplay. Lippert told me he talked with Skouras, and they agreed to move this project up into the nervous “A” class and spend more money on it. It was an intriguing story and could make a good solid film. Lippert called me in and told me he wanted me to produce this film, but I had to also continue with my usual chores. He wanted a tight rein on Cornfield due to his lack of knowledge and expertise in the business. Bob told me I had the right temperament to work with a sometimes non-verbal Hubert, as well as the know-how to get the job done and on budget. I was to be compensated over and above my regular salary for the producing chore.

I worked very closely with Hubert on the screenplay – leading him away from scenes that were not cost-efficient, but always making sure not to tie his hands too tightly. Like most young people at that time, Hubert hated authority and didn’t trust most people over 30. I was around that age, so he thought of me as a contemporary. We got along fine.

We cast Edmond O'Brien, Laraine Day and Julie London. We shot in and around Los Angeles and Malibu. Half of the story was laid in Mexico, so Malibu and the hills above it worked fine for us. The film went very smoothly the first few weeks until we started shooting on stage. There was a scene where Eddie O'Brien was tape-recording a monologue that ran nearly four pages. It was a scene that would set up the plot and Hubert wanted Eddie to do it in one long take. Due to the length of the scene, Eddie didn't want to rehearse it, as there was no movement. All he did was sit at a bar in the house and record the dialogue on tape. We rolled the camera, Hubert said "Action," and the scene began.

O'Brien began his speech and was letter-perfect right up to the last couple of lines, when he blew a couple of words. Hubert cut the camera and Eddie apologized to Hubert and the entire company. Hubert mumbled something. I couldn't hear what he said, but Eddie was close to him and Eddie said rather quietly, "What did you say?" Hubert answered, "I said, if you knew your lines, you wouldn't have to apologize." With that, O'Brien came off the barstool, grabbed Hubert around the neck with both hands, and started hitting his head against the set. I ran in and tried to pull Eddie away, but he wouldn't let go. One of our grips stepped in and the two of us pulled O'Brien off Hubert. I quickly took Eddie by the arm, walked him off the stage and started trying to calm him down. He threatened to walk off the show, but I knew he was too much of a seasoned professional to really go. I told him Hubert had committed the cardinal sin by saying what he said to any actor, but more importantly, to someone of the stature of Eddie O'Brien. He was not only an extremely nice, warm man, but a consummate pro.

After walking and talking for a while, Eddie agreed to return to the set and finish the picture. As the two of us arrived back on set, the crew and Hubert were sitting around waiting. So I told Hubert to continue shooting and not to say anything to Eddie except "Action" and "Cut." Before we resumed, Eddie walked up to Hubert and nose-to-nose said very quietly, "I'm going to finish this show, but the day we wrap, I'm going to beat your head into a pulp." He turned, got back on the barstool and waited to hear "Action." Eddie went through the entire four pages without missing a line and gave a terrific performance. The crew and I applauded. Hubert just smiled. We had about two weeks left to shoot and as the last day drew near, Hubert was dreading the words "wrap" for he and I still believed Eddie would make good on his promise. Just in case, I had already spoken to a couple of crew members to stand by, ready to pull O'Brien off of Hubert again.

The final day arrived and we were shooting on the back roads above Malibu – doing run bys and car shots. At the close of the day, I thanked the cast and crew for a very

good job and walked over and personally thanked Eddie O'Brien with a hug of appreciation. He returned the embrace and thanked me.

Hubert had already gotten into his stand by car for his ride back to the studio. I'm sure he was going to lock the doors if Eddie approached him. Eddie did just that... he walked over to the car and rapped on the glass. Hubert lowered the window and Eddie pushed his hand through the open car window and shook Hubert's hand. The two men smiled and Eddie walked back to his car and his driver drove away. The sign of an honest to God trooper. I still love and admire Eddie even though he's no longer with us. I'll always have a warm spot in my heart for him. After the film's release, it received very good notices and did fairly well at the box office.

Hubert came to us with another book he wanted to film. The title was *The Snatchers*. Due to the title's connotation, I said "Good luck, Hubert. The first thing you do is change the title." He replied that it was a kidnapping story and in Europe, the title had no such connotation. He refused to change it. We passed on the project, but in 1968, he was able to put a deal together with Marlon Brando and shot it in his home town of Paris, France. It didn't do well.

Years later, when I was working with Michael Landon, Hubert called me and wanted me to be producer on another feature he had put together. I was flattered, but was totally committed to the Landon Company at that time. I thanked him and never heard anymore about him or the project.

CHAPTER 23

After we wrapped *The Third Voice*, Lippert told me he wanted to film the John Fox Jr. classic story entitled, “The Little Shepherd Of Kingdom Come.” He had spoken with Skouras and he agreed to up the budget and release it through the studio apposed to the Regal Films logo. We had done this before on a couple of films starting in 1958 with Kurt Neuman’s *The Fly*. Kurt found it as a short story in *Playboy* magazine and brought it to us. We got James Clavell to do the screenplay and the rest, as they say, is history! Anyway, *Shepherd* would be in color and Barre Landon would do the screenplay. Andrew McLaglen had directed his father, Victor, in a not-too-hot film for us less than a year before. The title escapes me, but I thought he did a good job for his first feature debut, so we signed him to direct *Shepherd*. The film starred Jimmy Rogers, Chill Wills, Luana Patton and the film debut of George Kennedy.

While we were filming on location at Big Bear, CA, I got a call from our story editor, Harry Spaulding, telling me Lippert had just fired Magginetti. I was shocked, to say the least. I recall saying that Bob Lippert must be out of his mind, literally. No one could do the Job Magginetti was doing – no one!! He’d been with Bob for something like 12 years and was a major asset to the company. When I thought of Regal Films, I thought first of Magginetti and then Lippert, for even though Bob put the deals together, it was Magginetti’s office that got the job done – no matter how difficult Lippert sometimes made things. I asked Spaulding who Bob had in mind to try and replace Bill Magginetti and without hesitating, he said, “You!” I was so angry when Spaulding told me why Lippert had fired Bill, I said that I would refuse to replace Bill due to the circumstances surrounding his termination – to say nothing of the fact that I was no Bill Magginetti. Spaulding said that upon my return to the studios in a few days, Lippert wanted a meeting with me to discuss the situation. I told Harry to inform him that I was not interested at all in his proposal and that I would stay on in a producer’s capacity only.

The background on Bill’s firing was as follows: Lippert had a long time “friend,” a woman of Greek descent named Margia Dean. Bob had been putting her in some of his earlier movies and tried to occasionally use her in the Fox products. Most of the experienced producers and directors we hired refused to accept her in their films, but some, who wanted the job, went along with Lippert and put her in their films. Bill always tried to talk Lippert out of using her in some of the more important products we were doing, because he knew she would downgrade the films and hurt Lippert and the company’s reputation. Margia somehow knew of Bill’s attitude toward her, even though that attitude only was known of between Bill, Lippert and myself. Bill never bad mouthed her to anyone that I knew of.

About a year before Bill's departure, Bill and I looked at the exorbitant amount of magnetic sound tape we had been buying over the previous three or four years. We decided it was a waste of money to continue buying the tape when we could start reclaiming it – by degousing, or demagnetizing the thousands of feet we kept in storage after a one-time use. We had a guy named Eddie Dutko, who was sort of a gofer with the company, so Bill put Eddie in charge of reclaiming the vast rolls of magnetic tape. Bill discovered that by reclaiming, we could save thousands of dollars, as opposed to purchasing new tape for every production. The reclaimed tape could not be used on production or music, but we could use it for sound effects, certain transfers, etc. Bill saved the company several thousands of dollars over the few years the reclamation was in use.

Margia Dean told Lippert that Bill Magginetti was taking the money from the sale of the reclaimed tapes and not putting it back into the company. It was the most horrible “trumped-up” story anyone could have thought of. I understand Bill vehemently denied it, but Lippert wouldn't back down. There was not one shred of evidence pointing to any thievery where Bill or the tapes were concerned. Lippert was only using this tact to get rid of Bill so Margia Dean would be placated. This is what I was told, this is what I believe.

The company of *Shepherd* arrived back in town on a Saturday afternoon from our location shoot. There was a message for me to meet with Lippert at 9 am the following Monday morning. I had several days on location to think about the meeting and I had made up my mind not to accept Bill's job — if for nothing more than the fact that he was my mentor and a close personal friend. I called Bill and told him of my anger and contempt for Lippert and Margia Dean over this affair, and Bill told me to please take the job – that it would be good for me, plus, it would really help Lippert to keep the company on an even keel. I was amazed that this good man would be concerned about Lippert's welfare after what he had done to him. I walked into Lippert's office at 9 am on Monday morning and he rose from behind his desk and shook my hand and told me how good the dailies looked on “Shepherd”. After the usual small talk about the production (we still had a few weeks of shooting left at the studio), Bob said, “Well, kid, as soon as you wrap up your show, you will take over the reins of running this company, production-wise.” He never mentioned Bill at all. I replied, “Thanks Bob, but no thanks. I'm not interested in Bill's job for several reasons, not the least of which is calling Bill Magginetti a thief, and firing the one person who is responsible for the success of this company's high standard and financial standing.” Bob almost choked on his five-dollar cigar, and at the same time, came out of his chair like a rocket. He said, in essence, “Who the hell are you to talk to me this way!” I interrupted by saying,

“I’m the guy who’s saying NO to your somewhat dubious offer.” He sat back down and very calmly said, “How dare you refuse me this favor after all I’ve done for you?” I replied, “First of all, Bob, you’ve done nothing for me that I haven’t done for you. I’ve worked here for over three years and given this company two dollars for every dollar I was paid.” He replied, “Look, kid. I can’t take a chance in bringing in an outsider to run my company. It would take months for him to get ensconced and with you, things could continue without a hitch. You owe me that much.” I said, “Okay, Bob. I’ll take the job on three conditions.” Again he jumped out of his chair and yelled, “HOW DARE YOU GIVE ME CONDITIONS?!!”

I got up, started toward the door and said, “Thanks for the offer, anyway.” Bob quickly said, “Listen kid, come back here... this meeting isn’t over yet.” He had lowered his tone, so I went back and sat down. He chewed on his cigar for a few seconds and finally asked, “What are the conditions?” I said very flatly, “One, I want twice the salary you paid Magginetti. Two, I want to continue to produce as well as manage the overall productions. And three – the most important one – you don’t *ever raise your voice to me*. Don’t ever try to talk down to me the way you did to Magginetti. The first time you do... I’ll walk – no matter what stage of production we’re in at the time.” Bob sat there for what seemed to be a lifetime. Finally he responded as he rose from the chair, extending his hand to me and saying, “Okay kid... let’s go to work.”

I know that down deep, Bob could have killed me for my demands and talking to him in that manner, but he knew he needed me far more than I needed him. So he bit his tongue and agreed. Bob Lippert was many things to many people. The one thing he was, was honest. His word was his bond. He was a tough negotiator, but when he said something you could bank on it. To the day I left, Bob never raised his voice to me or had a superior attitude toward me.

CHAPTER 24

Another “son of the pioneers” was a fellow named Randy Hood. Randy had shot some industrial films for companies like Jam Handy out of Detroit. He came to us through Skouras, who was a friend of Randy’s father, who happened to be chairman of United States Steel. Randy was to spend time under my supervision and eventually direct a show for us. He was a handsome intelligent guy whose youthful appearance belied his 40 years. I made him an assistant to me and we got along great. We finally found a script for him to direct. The title was *The Two Little Bears* starring Eddie Albert, Jane Wyatt and Brenda Lee. Randy did a super Job of directing and turned in a nice show. All of our products were strictly family entertainment. We sometimes would get stuck with simple, cute kinds of scripts to please Fox and Lippert.

Randy was married and had a couple of children – a boy and a girl about 10 and 12 years old. I’d met his wife on several occasions and liked her. However, about a year later, Randy divorced her and married Miyoshi Umeki – the actress who co-starred in *Sayonara* with Marlon Brando and *Red Buttons*. A couple years later, Randy died. I think it was a heart attack that killed him. He was only around 42 years of age.

Another person who came to us was Gene Fowler, Jr., son of the noted writer. Gene was an editor at the time and was considered one of the best. He was an intelligent, nice man who wanted to start directing films rather than continue editing them. He brought a script and writer with him. The writer was Lou Vittes, a solid scenarist, and the two men seemed to compliment each other. The first film that the pair shot was *Showdown At Boot Hill* starring Charles Bronson. It was a well-made show and Gene stayed on to do others. Gene and Lou came to me with an idea titled *I Married A Monster From Outer Space*. That’s when all the alien films were being made. The more provocative the title, the more interest one could create. Lippert turned down the idea as it didn’t seem suited for family fare. It was an extremely exploitative title, but the story was really quite good. Using my title at Lippert’s, I set up a meeting at Paramount Studios with the head of distribution and the three of us had a very successful meeting. Paramount agreed to do the project and I was to be the producer. When I approached Lippert about taking a three-month leave to do the film at Paramount, he turned me down, saying the company couldn’t go that long without me, as he wanted to give me more producing chores in the very near future. Gene and Lou settled in at Paramount and made the picture, which starred Tom Tryon and Gloria Talbot. The film did well at the box office and got fairly good reviews.

Burt Balaban, of the Paramount Balabans, brought us the book, *Murder Inc.* Lippert decided it should go out as a Fox feature and got Skouras to agree. The film shot in New York City and Stuart Rosenberg wound up directing it. When Skouras viewed some of the first dailies that arrived at the studio with Bob Lippert, he flew into a rage – wanting to know who put a cockeyed actor in one of the studios pictures. Lippert told me that Skouras wanted to reshoot the week's work and recast the actor. When Bob explained how much it would put the modest budget in jeopardy, Skouras relented. The actor was Peter Falk who went on to get an Oscar nomination for best supporting actor in the film.

Lippert loved to do remakes of famous films such as *The Cabinet Of Dr. Caligari*, the German classic of 1919. He came up with a writer/director from Europe named Roger Kay. Bob told me to give Roger a wide berth because he expected a great film from him. In my first meeting with Kay, I summed him up as a pseudo-intellectual — after listening to him espouse his own virtues and self-proclaimed genius. He wrote a screenplay that virtually had nothing to do with the original. He had phallic symbols no one but he, himself, understood. After reading the final draft screenplay, and dealing with Kay for weeks, I went to Lippert and told him to dump Kay and take our losses now – before spending a lot of money to produce what was inevitable to be a waste of time, money and effort. Bob overruled me and the film was made. It starred Glynis Johns and Dan O'Herlihy. We shot it at Goldwyn's studio. I told Lippert the project was his baby and that I would only control the production end and that he could handle Mr. Kay and everything above the line.

On my way to the office, on the first day of shooting, I stopped by the studio to check on their progress. When I walked on the set, I found Kay smoking his cigar and sitting in his director's chair. The set was lit and the crew was standing around having coffee and donuts. I asked the assistant director, Lee Lukather, what was happening and he told me Kay had yelled and said some bad things to Glynis Johns during rehearsal. Johns ran to her dressing room crying and has refused to come back to the set for work.

Rather than going to Roger Kay and making my demands, I went to the phone, called Lippert who was just leaving his house, and told him how much it was costing for every minute the company sat and waited for the genius to go to Johns, get her and start shooting. He told me to tell Kay to start or I was to fire him. I told Bob that he had hired him, it was his job to fire him.

In about 15 minutes, Lippert walked onto the set. I told him nothing had changed and he walked over to Kay, who was still sitting in his chair and asked him what was wrong.

Kay replied something to the effect that he was running this show and that everyone would do as he says. Lippert, who was smoking a cigar twice the size of Kay's, said in a loud tone, "You get yourself to her dressing room and apologize to Glynis, or whatever you have to do, or I'll throw your ass off this set and send you back to wherever you came from!" – words to that affect. Kay literally sputtered and made some strange noises, but went to John's dressing room, knocked and entered. A few minutes later, the twosome came onto the set and started filming. The film was a critical and financial failure.

Another idea that Bob came up with was a circus epic entitled *The Big Show* (1961). It starred Esther Williams, Cliff Robertson, Nehemiah Persoff and Robert Vaughn. Again, Lippert hired James Clark to direct. Clark had just finished a nice film for us that was shot in Holland, *Dog Of Flanders* (1959). Another famous remake. *The Big Show* was shot in Germany – Munich primarily, although we also shot in Garmisch and Berchtesgaden. During the last few weeks of shooting, the company fell behind in their shooting schedule and they were rapidly approaching the Christmas and New Year's holidays. That meant that for several days, the company would be shut down, while everyone, cast and crew, would continue to be paid. Lippert realized how much more that would cost, and after talking with our American production manager/assistant director, Clarence Eurst, Bob was told that it didn't look good, as far as making up the lost time before the holidays. Bob asked me what we should do and I replied that without knowing all the facts, I could not really respond. The next day, I packed my bag and started on my journey to Germany.

It was around the 20th of December and the east coast, as well as most of Europe, was heavily involved with severe winter weather. It was the first time on a jet plane for me and, at that time, I was not a good passenger. The flight, however, to NYC was okay, but arriving there we were met with a tremendous snow/sleet and wind storm. The runways at the airport were all frozen over and as soon as they melted the ice, the runways refroze before they could land any aircraft. We arrived in NYC. at around 10 pm and they started stacking planes due to the non-landing procedure. Two hours later, around midnight, our pilot was directed to go to Toronto, Canada, to try and land. Only the airport authorities knew how many airplanes were going around in circles, one above the other, but there had to be plenty for they had landed nothing for over two hours at the second busiest airport in America. We arrived at Toronto about 45 minutes later. The weather was bad, but not enough to keep us from landing. We were put on buses and sent to a hotel to spend the night.

I had barely gotten in bed when, at around 2:30 am, the phone rang. The voice instructed me to be in the lobby in 30 minutes to leave for the airport. The weather had improved and they were landing at La Guardia. We re-boarded and finally arrived in NYC. Due to the hours of delay, I missed my connecting flight to London, so for 24 hours, I sat in the airport trying to get a flight to Europe. Finally, they put me on a plane and hours later, we were on the approach to Heathrow Airport outside London. The pilot had cut the jet engines back many miles before our scheduled landing and it seemed like we had been coasting for about an hour. All I could hear was a high frequency sound of the low speed jet engines. I had flown the Atlantic Ocean at nighttime and now, at around 5 am, we were in such heavy clouds or fog that the outside windows were completely fogged over. Everyone except me seemed to be sound asleep. After what seemed to be an eternity of coasting, the pilot's voice told everyone to fasten their seat belts – that we would be landing in a few minutes. The high shrill of the engines became more faint as we all settled into our landing mode.

I was tired and sleepy for I hadn't slept since I left Los Angeles. I couldn't sleep on planes and didn't sleep sitting up at the airport in NYC, either. Just as I was closing my eyes to await the feel and sound of the plane's wheels touching terra firma, all hell seemed to break loose! There was an incredible loud blasting sound and the aircraft shook until I thought it would shake apart, and then a sinking feeling in my stomach as the plane began an instant climb into the air. My first thoughts were that we had hit a mountain or some such object due to the sound I heard.

What happened was, Heathrow was fogged in but they thought they could still land our plane. At the very last minute, they called off the landing, but our plane was almost completely committed and the pilot his both engines at once, giving him maximum power to gain altitude as quickly as possible. That was the sound we heard: the engines being pushed into high gear. The shaking was due to the force of those engines reverberating throughout the body of the aircraft. I knew it was the end for me when the incident first occurred, but after the plane was again at a proper altitude, the pilot apologized and explained what had happened. Due to the fog, we were stacked, just like in NYC.

The stacking lasted for nearly two hours when our pilot informed us that we were going to Aberdeen, Scotland, because we were running low on fuel. (That was an encouraging piece of info.) We pulled out of the stacking pattern and headed for Scotland.

A short time later, the pilot informed us that the fuel was not sufficient to reach Aberdeen, so he was going to “set us down at a nearby airport by the name of Prestwick.” What he didn't tell us was Prestwick was not a jet field and therefore, the

runways were too short to land jet aircraft. Nonetheless, he landed it — even though it ran off the end of the tarmac into some mud and stopped about a hundred feet from a chain-link fence. We deplaned after a cat pulled us back on the hard surface of the runway.

The lobby of the airport was about the size of my living room with a potbelly stove in the middle of the room, the only source of heat in a freezing, rain-soaked environment. We were told that this being a non-jet airport, there was no jet fuel available and it must be trucked in from Aberdeen – a delay of at least six to eight hours. We were also informed that even though the runway wasn't long enough for a jet landing, the pilot guaranteed it was long enough for a takeoff.

After a few hours, the 200-plus passengers and I stood around the wood-burning stove trying to get warm. The poor babies were crying and the handful of young children kept warm by running around the group playing tag. The pilot announced that the jet fuel was on its way from Aberdeen, and those who wanted to wait for the delivery may do so. Those who didn't want to wait for several hours, could board a train and continue on to London. I figured out that by waiting, I would still get to England many hours before the train would. About 90% of the passengers opted for the train. A few of the brave (or stupid, take your pick), held our breath as the newly-fueled jet (just barely) cleared the fence on takeoff.

I was already over two days later for my arrival in Munich, Germany, which was my final destination. We finally arrived at Heathrow Airport near London and I had no connecting flight, due to my delay. I spoke with the supervisor at the airlines and explained my plight. I explained to him the importance of my being in Munich as soon as possible. I explained the financial loss Fox Studios would take every day I was detained. It was the Christmas holiday and every airline was booked solid. The weather was bad all over Europe, and their schedules had all been shot to hell. The supervisor took pity on me and my hard luck story and got me on a flight to Paris — with a connection to Frankfurt and then to Munich.

I arrived nearly three days late, at 2 am in Munich. I got a taxi and went to the Ambassador Hotel, where the American contingency was staying. I checked in and took a long, hot shower, the first one since I'd left Los Angeles three days before. I unpacked my pajamas and got ready for bed. There was only one problem – the room had no bed. There were some chairs, a desk, a radio, a sofa, etc, but no bed. I called the concierge and asked where my bed was. In a few moments, a bellboy entered my room, walked over to a draped wall, drew the draperies and in a rectangular inset, the bed was exposed.

I felt like an idiot but was too tired and sleepy to give it much thought. I apologized and the bellboy left. I took off my robe and started to get into the bed, then realized there were no blankets on the bed. I went to the closet and, opening the door, looked for the blankets on the closet shelf. But there were none. Again, I got upset and called the desk and explained that there were no bed coverings. A few minutes later, a replay of the earlier scene. The bellboy entered, walked over to the bed and lifted a large feather piece that resembled a five- or six-inch thick mattress. He indicated that I sleep under the mattress (this was a German blanket). The “mattress” was as light as two blankets and kept me warm as toast. “You can take the boy out of the country, but you can’t take the country out of the boy.”

I set my alarm for 5:30 am, knowing I would only be getting a couple of hours sleep. As soon as the alarm sounded, I called Clarence Eurist, our production manager and told him I had finally arrived. We had coffee and strudel for breakfast and he filled me in on the latest schedule problems.

They had finished their location shooting and had about a week or 10 days of interior, studio shooting, but they would lose several more days due to shutting down for the holidays. We went to the studio and I looked at the sets – nothing elaborate, but not cheap either. I put a call in to John Mansbridge, our art director. After explaining the sets to him, I decided to close down the film. Bring all of the Americans back to Hollywood and shut down the production until after Christmas. In the meantime, Mansbridge would be building sets at the studio.

One of the reasons that the company had fallen behind was due to Esther Williams being ill for a few days. When I returned to town, I put a claim in for the cast insurance money we had on her. With that, and bringing the production back to Hollywood, we came out okay on our final budget.

The film was a moderate success at the box office, but the critics didn’t care for Williams in a dramatic role. It had excellent production values, having been shot almost entirely in Germany – taking advantage of the beautiful exteriors in the Bavarian Alps, etc. Outside of the American stars, director and production manager, the rest of the cast and crew were Europeans. We brought a German cinematographer, living in England, to photograph the film in color. We used one of Europe’s leading circuses, giving total believability to the acts.

CHAPTER 25

A gentleman named Jack Leewood came to Lippert's about 1957. He had worked with Bob several years before, when Lippert was making his own films. Jack was an ex-publicity agent for a major studio and Bob had sent him to Europe to supervise some of the pictures he was co-producing with a British film company. Jack came to us as a producer and, as it turned out, stayed on to produce several solid films. I was warned by an employee who had been with Lippert for several years to watch out for Leewood. Because, being a close personal friend of Bob's, my job might be in jeopardy. Nothing was farther from the truth. Jack and I became good friends instantly, and I am proud to say we remained very close friends until he passed away over 40 years later.

One of the "sons of the pioneers" was Richard Lyons. His claim to fame, at that time, was that his stepfather was an officer of Leows, Inc. So, Richard came to us as a wannabe producer, like the others. Lippert assigned him to me to teach him the fine points of producing. Richard was an amiable, easygoing person and was eager to learn. He was finally given a project and I physically produced the show, but Richard learned a lot and, naturally, was given screen credit as producer.

His director was Paul Landres, a busy and really qualified guy. Paul stayed on to do several more project for us. The film's title was *Frontier Gun* (1958) starring John Agar and Robert Strauss of *Stalag 17* fame. A little later, Richard went to MGM and produced a Western starring Randolph Scott and Joel McCrea entitled *Ride The High Country* (1962). It was Sam Peckinpah's direction, early in his career. After that, Richard continued to do Westerns at Universal.

About the same time, Lippert signed Samuel Fuller to do a couple of pictures. The first was *China Gate* (1957), which starred Gene Barry, Angie Dickinson and Nat "King" Cole. Fuller wanted to blow up part of a World War II European village that existed on the old 40-acre RKO back lot (situated close to the Selznick Studios.) The location was nearly in the heart of Culver City and the police and fire departments said it could be done only early in the evening and that it must be a minimum charge. The Friday night that the special effects explosion was to happen, Fuller got behind in his schedule, and around midnight he was going to shoot the scene that included the blast. Magginetti and I, both were there and Bill told Fuller that it was too late for the effect unless it was a very small one. Fuller paid no attention to him and proceeded with the shooting.

About 12:30 am, the explosion was set off and the effect was tremendous, but so was the sound! In about 10 minutes, the Culver City police and fire departments came roaring in and shut the company down. We still had several hours left to shoot, but

Fuller and Magginetti couldn't change the officials' minds. Bill called Lippert at home and apprised him of the situation. Half an hour later, Lippert was on the scene and talked the officials into letting Fuller continue, with no more explosions. Naturally, Lippert blamed Bill for allowing Fuller the right to set off the charge.

The second film Fuller shot for us was *Forty Guns* (1957), starring Barbara Stanwyck and Barry Sullivan, with John Erickson, Dean Jagger and Gene Barry. It was a Western and we shot the town on the old Tombstone street on the back lot at Fox. During the exterior days on the street, Fuller wore two guns around his waist. We called him "Two Gun Sammy." We later found out that he had real bullets in his six guns. There was a scene where Stanwyck with her 40 gunmen, rode into town and shot up the place. After the master scene was photographed, Fuller cleared the Western set and began personally shooting out most of the windows in the various buildings. We didn't know he was going to do that until it was all over. The studio production office heard about it and raised hell with Magginetti, but Fuller had already left the lot for the day.

Lippert signed Burt Kennedy to direct his first film. It was entitled *The Canadians* and starred Robert Ryan, John Dehner and Torin Thatcher. The lead female was Teresa Stratas. She was a Metropolitan opera star, and had no business in a picture about Mounties. It was a Fox/Lippert/Canadian production and I'm sure it wasn't Burt's idea to cast her.

At the same time, we were shooting a film on Kauai, Hawaii entitled *Seven Women from Hell*, starring John Kerr, Patricia Owens, Cesar Romero and Denise Darcel. A year later, we made a film in Athens Greece, entitled *It Happened In Athens* starring Jayne Mansfield and Bob Mathias. These films were just a few of the over 100 pictures we produced in a seven-year period.

CHAPTER 26

We inherited a “package” from Fox that included a \$125,000 dollar screenplay by Rod Serling, a \$100,000 dollar cast charge for Pat Boone, a \$25,000 dollar cast charge for Steve Forrest and a similar amount for Barbara Eden. Lippert agreed to do the above, including a director’s salary of around \$400,000 dollars — leaving us a total of somewhere around \$250,000 dollars for a budget. We signed Buzz Kulik as director. We wound up with a terrific supporting cast including, Jack Klugman, Jesse White, Milton Selzer, John Banner, Jeff Cory and Harold Gould. The film was a nice production, but didn’t really come off. It did nothing at the box office and the critics panned it. Serling, Boone, Forrest and Eden were all play-or-pay contracts, so Skouras preferred to play instead of paying off the commitments. (Probably should not have thrown good money after bad.) I produced the show, and with due respect to all concerned, the production overshadowed the drama.

Around 1961, the company cut back on production as requested by Skouras. Lippert, knowing the end was in sight, decided to spread the money over a group of lesser-budgeted films, rather than continue a few more years at the established allocated amount per show. He dropped the Regal Films logo and formed a new company named Associated Producers, Inc. Due to the lower budget requirements, we decided to do all the product “in house” rather than bring outside talent in. Lippert wanted to experiment on one film to see if we could actually produce a small “releasable” film for peanuts. After trying to talk him out of it, I finally acquiesced, with the proviso that I not only produce, but direct. Lippert said, “What do you know about directing? You’ve never directed anything.” I agreed, but stated that unless I had full control, I could not, would not, guarantee the project would be on budget. He agreed, reluctantly, and with Harry Spaulding doing the screenplay, we were able to put the show together with very little money and no problems. The title was *High Powered Rifle*. That was the title that Bob Lippert came up with and Spaulding had to write a story to at least justify the title. Lippert loved to pick what he thought were saleable titles for the films. Harry had to write original stories and screenplays based somewhat on Lippert’s titles.

I recall Bob saying the next film’s title is *Police Nurse*. Harry wrote an original screenplay about a police nurse. The only problem was... there was never a capacity for a nurse in the police department. We shot the film anyway.

Getting back to *High Powered Rifle*, we cast Willard Parker and Allison Hays in the lead roles. My first day of shooting was in a practical house (a real house, not a set), and I staged the first scene by having Willard sit next to Allison on a corner sofa. I turned to my cameraman, Floyd Crosby and said, “That’s it, you can start lighting the set.”

Floyd asked me what my coverage was and I replied, "Two over-shoulders," as we were shooting in CinemaScope and I felt tight over-shoulders would look better than close ups. Floyd asked how he was going to get the camera on the opposite side of Allison for her over-shoulder shot. "We can't take a wall out to shoot it... we're not in a studio." That was my baptism of directing. Obviously, I re-staged the scene and never let myself get into that proverbial corner again. Thank goodness, it was the very first scene I had ever staged for a film.



We budgeted the film at half the cost of other films we had been making and through some miracle, we came in on budget and had a nice little releasable movie. We never tried that again, but it did prove that by doing everything ourselves, we could get a lot more production value on the screen for a little less than we'd been spending.

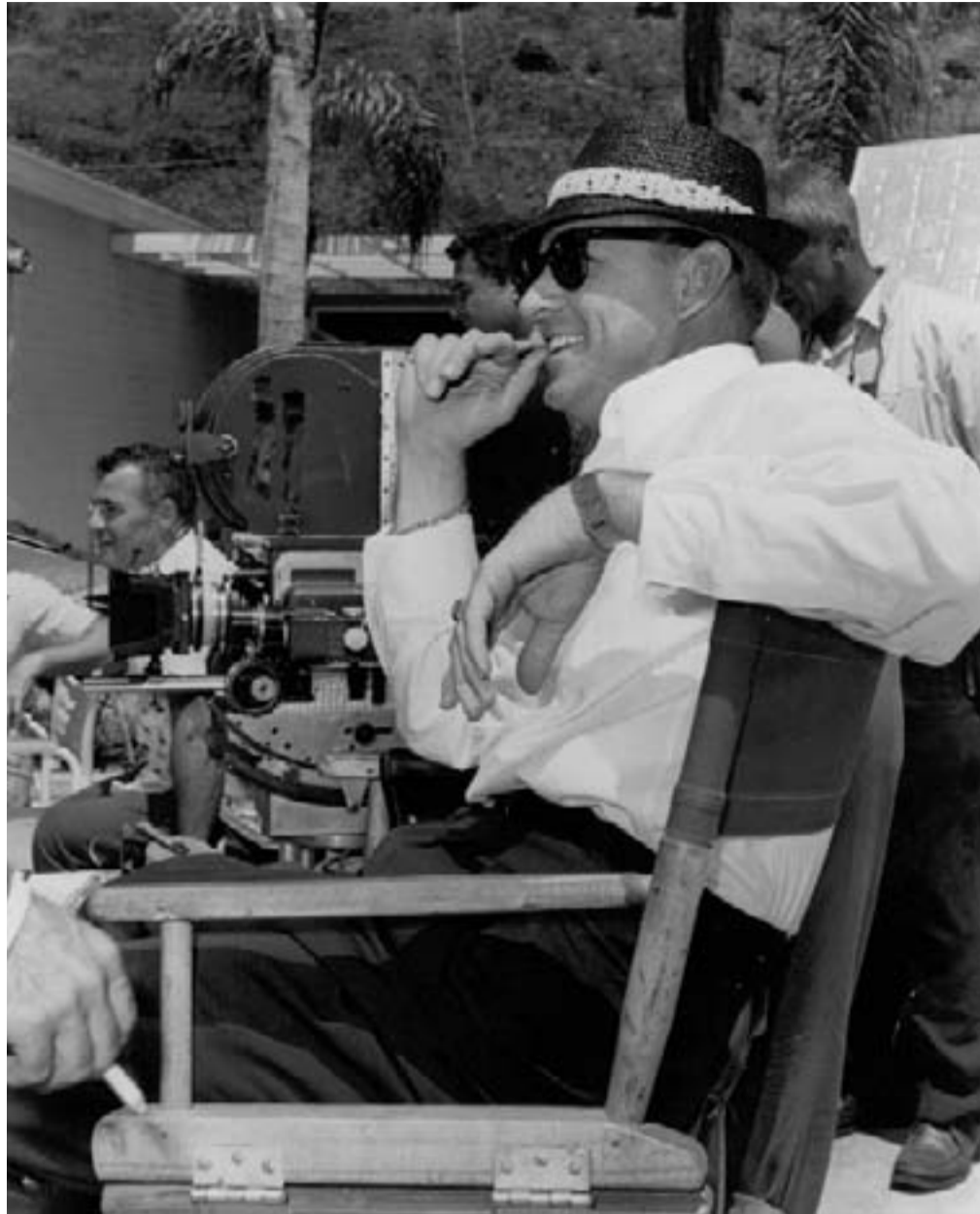
CHAPTER 27

For the next four years, I produced and directed almost all the company's product. I did 15 films as producer/director and produced *Little Shepherd*, *Third Voice* and *The Yellow Canary* over that four-year period. The second film I did was *The Purple Hills*, a Western starring Gene Nelson, Kent Taylor and Joana Barnes.

We shot it entirely on location at Big Bear, California. With the big pines and cool mountains, the show looked a lot more expensive than the meager budget we had. Shooting the beautiful backgrounds in CinemaScope and color didn't hurt either.

Speaking of Westerns, I recall that around 1959-'60, we shot a film entitled *The Oregon Trail* starring Fred MacMurray and directed by Gene Fowler, Jr. I believe Lou Vites wrote the screenplay. Anyway, we had a last-minute script meeting on a Saturday afternoon, just prior to principal photography. The following Monday morning, several of the scenes that were altered or completely rewritten were scenes that had been scheduled to shoot on the first day. MacMurray was heavily involved with some of these scenes, so late Saturday, the mimeo company picked up the revised scenes and promised to have them printed by early Sunday morning. I was concerned about MacMurray getting late changes, so I instructed the mimeo company to hand deliver the new scenes to Fred's home on Sunday morning. I personally called Fred and apologized for the late changes and told him that he would receive them on Sunday, in time to study them for the following day. He was very nice and said the following: "Don't worry about it. For the amount of money you people are paying me... I'd ride a bicycle down Hollywood Boulevard in the nude!" My kind of guy... nothing pretentious about him.

The third film that I produced and directed was *Womanhunt*, a suspense show we shot on and around the streets of Los Angeles. The show starred Steven Peck and Lisa Lu. Steve had just finished *Some Came Running* starring Sinatra, Shirley MacLaine and Dean Martin. Steve was outstanding in the film, playing the lead heavy.



Directing *Womanhunt*, starring Steven Piccaro and Lisa Lu, for Associated Producers, 1962.

After shooting several other provocatively titled films, I did a movie entitled, *Young Guns Of Texas*. Now, I can use the term “Sons Of The Pioneers” literally. The film starred James Mitchum, son of Robert; Alana Ladd, daughter of Alan Ladd; Jody McCrea, son of Joel McCrea; and Will Wills, son of Chill Wills. I shot the film entirely on location in Tucson, Arizona, at old Tucson Studios as well as in the Big Bend National Park of Texas. It was a color film and the backgrounds, particularly the Big Bend scenes, were truly beautiful.

A couple of years before, we did a movie based on Zoe Akins’s novel, *The Sad Horse* starring young David Ladd, Alan’s son. He was about 10 or 12 years old and lacked experience before the cameras. He acted in a film with Alan a year or so before, but he played a boy who wouldn’t speak, so his acting ability was really limited. James Clark directed *The Sad Horse* and it also starred Chill Wills. I spent most of the production working with David on his lines and his delivery.

Alan and Sue Carol, his wife, came up to the location where we were shooting and spent the night with their son, David. Alan Ladd had always been my screen idol, since I first saw him in *This Gun For Hire* back in 1942. It was a terrific treat for me to finally get to meet and dine with my movie hero. He and Sue were very nice, down to earth people and I was invited to their home on Mapleton Drive several times, prior to Alan's death. I have always regretted that I never told Alan how he had influenced me as a young actor. I'm sure I saw every film he ever made. As an aspiring teenage actor, I always wanted to be another Alan Ladd and now, some 15 years later, I not only knew him personally, but guided two of his children through the art of acting in two of our films.

I was vacationing in Hawaii when I heard the news that Alan had died. I called right away and gave my deepest sympathy to Sue and the family. His death affected me quite deeply as I felt a part of me was missing – for I had continued to think of Alan as an inspiration in my life. Even now, I have nearly all of his movies on tape and every once in a while, I will view them and still enjoy his performances.

CHAPTER 28

In 1962, I went to San Juan, Puerto Rico and did a couple of films back to back. The first was *Harbor Lights* starring Kent Taylor. The other was a film my good friend and colleague Jack Leewood produced and directed. I shot my show in and around San Juan, while Jack worked basically at Maya Guez on the other side of the island.

A few days prior to principle photography, the Puerto Rican co-producer Frank Moreno and I began looking for locations around the Island for my show, *Harbor Lights*. He told me that the best way to see the island was from the air, and that he had a single engine piper that we could use. I met him at the airport the following morning and we took off in his small plane. We flew along the coast for a couple of hours, flying low and observing the terrain. I didn't see anything that really interested me so I told him to head back to San Juan. He maneuvered the plane in a 90-degree turn, rather than a 180-degree and headed inland, rather than back down the coastline toward where we came from.

A few minutes later, we encountered a strong tropical storm heading directly toward us – or rather, us toward it. Within minutes, we were bucking extremely strong head winds and thrashing rain. Moreno continued headlong into the now violent storm and all of a sudden, the engine cut out and we started losing altitude as he kept trying to restart the single engine. I thought, how in heaven's name, did I ever allow myself to get into this ridiculous situation. The small craft began to drop, slowly, but surely, toward the ground below as Moreno desperately tried to restart the engine. The storm was still in force and we started a nosedive toward oblivion. As we lost altitude the weather below was not as severe as the higher altitude, so the winds were less strong. Finally, the engine sputtered... sputtered... and thank God, finally started.

Moreno swung the plane around toward San Juan and we flew at a very uncomfortably low altitude – all the way back to the airport. As we were landing, I asked Moreno what he wanted to show me that was so important to make him attempt to defy the elements such as he had done. He said, "Oh, nothing of interest was out there. It's just that I haven't been flying very long, and I need to log some more *bad weather flying!*" He never knew how close I came to throttling the son of a bitch!

The second film that Jack Leewood produced and directed starred Brian Kelly. As they were filming scenes at the zoo at Mayaguez, Kelly began teasing one of the Lions in a cage by throwing small pebbles at him and hitting him most of the time. I told Jack, who hadn't noticed this off camera action, to tell his Star to cease the unfunny antics. However, Kelly got a few more throws in before he stopped. A few minutes later, while

filming a scene next to the same cage, Kelly was standing with his back to the lion and without any notice, the large beast proceeded to lift its rear leg and cover Mr. Kelly with urine. Now, that was funny... revenge. Ah, sweet revenge!

CHAPTER 29

Back in Hollywood, I shot a movie entitled *The Day Mars Invaded Earth*, starring Kent Taylor and Marie Windsor. We used the Greystone Mansion in Beverly Hills as the backdrop for the story. Harry Spaulding wrote the original screenplay as he had done on every show before and after that I had done for Lippert. It was, to me, one of Harry's best efforts and turned out to be a really nice little film.

After shooting several Westerns, action, sci-fi and suspense movies, Lippert decided to get in on the new fad American International was doing – “Beach Party” movies. We did several of them. In one entitled *Wild On The Beach*, I had the dubious honor of using, in their film debut, Sonny and Cher. Our casting director Fred Roos — a near genius, by the way, when it came to finding new talent — sold me on putting them in the film when I had never seen or heard of them. When the picture was released, some of the theaters across the country put “Starring Sonny and Cher” on their marquee even though they only did one number in the film.

The night that they, along with other cast members, came to the studio to pre-record their numbers, I was flabbergasted as they walked in. They both looked like cave people from prehistoric times. They were wearing coats that looked like they had just killed and skinned some unfortunate beast of the Neanderthal period. My only thought was, if I could get my hands on Fred Roos!

The days that followed brought the duo to the set to film their number. I rehearsed their moves and the moves of the camera and checked their lip-sync against the pre-recorded playback and announced we would go for a take. Sonny informed me they could not perform without their mikes. I told him that this was a movie and that they needed no mikes due to the pre-recording of the musical number. He said that they couldn't perform unless they both held mikes in their hands as they had never worked without them. So, we all sat on our tails while the sound crew went to the studio sound department and retrieved two hand-held microphones for the pair.

CHAPTER 30

In 1964, Lippert decided to do a Western in Spain. He negotiated a co-production deal with a Spanish production company to be his partner in the film. We would pay for all of the “above the line” costs and they would pick up all the “below the line” costs. We would pay for an American director (yours truly), star, story and screenplay. They, in turn, would be responsible for the location costs, studio, crew and post-production — including editing, scoring, dubbing and answer print. Spaulding wrote the screenplay and titled it *Outlaw From Red River*. Lippert loved the titled, for it had words that had been synonymous with Westerns for over 35 years – “outlaw” and “Red River.” Again, the title had nothing to do with the film’s plot. Lippert sent the script to George Montgomery’s agent and a short time later, George called Bob personally and said he liked the script, but wanted to know who was directing. Bob told him it was Maury Dexter and George said he had seen *Young Guns Of Texas* and was impressed with my work. So he agreed to star in the film.

Bob told me he was going to put Margia Dean in the leading female role and asked me to call her and say it was my idea. I told him in no uncertain terms that I would not call her and would not direct if she even came on the set. He knew how I felt about her and up to that time had never pressed me to use her. Apparently, Bob had already committed her for the role without consulting me. So he actually pleaded with me to work with her. I stayed adamant, and refused to discuss it further. Bob wanted Montgomery to star and had already committed him for the lead role – and after discovering that George wanted to work with me, Bob was between a rock and a hard place. He finally relented, but he didn’t like it. I didn’t know about George’s reaction to my work until he told me while we were shooting in Spain.



With George Montgomery in Madrid, Spain, for *Outlaw Of Red River* (1966, later retitled *Django The Condemned*).

We stayed at the Castilana Hilton Hotel in Madrid and shot at a local film studio, plus many locations away from the city as well as a brand new “Western town” that had just been completed. I shot the film in January and February of 1964.

When I first arrived, late in December to do pre-production work, the weather was stable. The days were clear and chilly and the nights were cold but not freezing. A show that has more exterior scenes than interior scenes is always scheduled to shoot the exteriors first and save the interior sets for cover, in case of bad weather. We scheduled the first weeks of shooting at the Western town.

It’s hard to believe, but just like Mexico a few years before, a sudden winter storm hit the area in and around Madrid and raged all night long – just a few days before we were to start principal photography at the Western town set, in the hills outside Madrid. By early morning, the storm had somewhat abated and the production crew and I drove out to see what, if any, damage had been done. As we neared the entrance to the town, through a winding road around huge rock formations, I held my breath, think of the disaster of Mexico. We drove up a curve and the town began to emerge, rising out of the huge boulders that surrounded it.

At first glimpse, I let out a sigh of relief because the buildings were covered with snow, but still standing. As we continued our drive into the main street, we could then see that most of the side street buildings, as well as some on the other end of town, were flattened. After the art director surveyed the damage, he estimated that he would need at least a week, if his crew worked 14-15 hours a day to repair and repaint the fallen building fronts. Needless to say, due to our set being damaged and the inclement weather, we had to start filming inside at the studio – using up some valuable cover sets.

On my flight to Madrid, we set down in Lisbon, Portugal for several hours so I spent that idle time taking in the sights and sounds of old Lisbon. I arrived in Madrid in the middle of the afternoon and checked into the hotel that had been previously arranged for me by the Spanish film company. I spent the remainder of the day at the studio getting familiar with some of the local crew that I was going to be working with. I got back to the hotel early that evening, showered, dressed and went down to the dining room for dinner. After a nice meal, I returned to my room and went to bed. I lay there staring at the ceiling until 3 am. My mind was tired, as was my body. But I could not fall asleep. I arose, dressed and went down stairs, where the only movement was the late night concierge. After a walk around the block, I returned to my room and continued to stay awake until 6 am. I again arose, showered, dressed, and went down to breakfast.

Later that morning, a studio car picked me up and I spent the next ten hours at the studio, preparing my work and began doing some preliminary casting. For the next five days and nights, I went to bed and did not sleep one wink. Around midnight every night, I would dress warmly and walk for miles around the city of Madrid. I got to know every nook and cranny within several miles of the hotel. I bought every magazine and book that was printed in English and spent the many hours at night reading them; when I wasn't walking, trying to tire myself out.

After the third day and night of no sleep at all, I finally asked the Spanish producer to call his doctor and get me some sleeping pills. He very nicely declined, but drove me to the American Hospital and the physician told me that it was prolonged jet lag and he refused to issue a prescription for any kind of sleeping aid. The drug stores in Spain don't carry any form of over the counter aid for insomnia.

As I said, this condition lasted from Monday through the following Friday. The really strange part of it was that during all those sleepless hours, I was never tired, sluggish or even sleepy during the daylight hours – so I got a lot of work done and my brain seemed to be functioning in a normal way. I arrived back at the hotel, late in the day on Friday. I showered, dressed, went down to dinner in the hotel dining room and then took a brisk walk around the area for about an hour. I stopped at several of the kiosk's

(newsstands) to try and find some additional reading materials for the long, sleepless night ahead.

Fortunately, I found a new book, in English, that I had not seen before. I purchased same and, with my new found partner, I headed back to the hotel for some good solid reading. When I arrived, back in my room I undressed, got into bed, as I had done the many nights before, picked up the new book, and began reading.

All of a sudden, the telephone began ringing and the sound startled me, but I didn't answer it until about the ninth ring. Finally, I picked up the receiver and only then did I realize that I had been jarred from a deep sleep. The caller was my studio driver informing me that he was there to drive me to the studio for a 10 o'clock casting appointment. I told him that the appointment was for Monday and not Saturday. There was a long pause and then he replayed, "Señor Dexter, this is Monday!" I had fallen asleep early in the evening on Friday and slept continuously until early Monday morning! Now, I understand what the doctor at the hospital meant when he told me that if I had started taking pills to sleep, I would be on them for my entire stay in Spain. After that long sleep, my system started functioning normally and my sleep pattern returned as well.

CHAPTER 31

David Lean's film *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) started shooting in old Madrid about the same time we did. They had numerous weather problems, what with using artificial snow on the streets, only to have real snow fall and wash away the fake stuff. This happened, as I recall, several times.

As we were in our final weeks of shooting, Ken Annakin's *Battle Of The Bulge* began to shoot somewhere up north of Madrid. He had a big name cast including Henry Fonda, Robert Shaw, Robert Ryan, Dana Andrews, Telly Savalas and Charles Bronson. However, when he heard George Montgomery was in Spain, he offered him a part in the film. George came to me and told me his starting date on *Battle* and finishing date with me would overlap by several days. I sat down with the schedule and rearranged the board in such a way as to shoot every scene with George over the next week or so and finish the scenes that he wasn't in later. It necessitated having to make double moves and relighting several sets, etc., but we worked it out and George left on schedule to begin filming on *Battle*. I must say I was extremely pleased that I was able to work out our schedule in order to accommodate George, as I have never worked with, or been around, any more professional or down to earth person as George Montgomery.

We shot a film around 1962 entitled *Battle At Bloody Beach* starring Audie Murphy and Gary Crosby. I believe Richard Maibaum wrote the screenplay and we shot it entirely on Catalina Island. The background was supposed to be somewhere in the Philippines. Part of the plot was a beach boat that our hero's took refuge in, so our art director, John Mansbridge, found an older World War Two sub chaser and had it "gutted" and towed to Catalina and beached there. His crew drove at least three "dead men anchors" into the beach to make sure the boat stayed partially on the beach and partially in the water, as though it had been driven ashore by some strong force. On a Saturday morning, just two days before we were to begin principle photography, I was awakened, around 6 am, by a call from Mansbridge, who was staying on the Island to complete his work. It was a female marine operator who asked me to accept the collect call. When I did, she said, "Go ahead Catalina, over." Mansbridge started shouting something unintelligible, then I heard, "over." I said, "John, I can't understand you... slow down... over." He continued to run his words together – plus a lousy connection – and I could not understand him. Finally, I said, "Take your time and enunciate. Over." He said, "The boat... over." "What about the boat?" I replied. He said, "The son of a bitch sunk!! Over!"

What happened was there had been extremely high waves that hit the island the night before and the strong surf pulled the anchors out of the earth and pulled the boat about a hundred feet back into the ocean. About half of the boat was under water. The marine

operator cut us off as soon as John yelled out his message. She came back on the air and informed us that profanity wasn't allowed on the airways. Poor John, after a couple of trying days, was able to have the boat re-beached and we started shooting on schedule.

CHAPTER 32

In early October of 1962, my mom died of cancer after an operation to remove a kidney. Several weeks later, we thought that she was going to be fine, but she had a relapse and passed away. She was a very wonderful, strong, yet gentle loving person. I was able to give her some luxuries in the last few years before her death, but nothing to make up for the pain and suffering she went through from the time my father was killed some twenty-seven years earlier.

Not only did she stand by me during those early years of my trying to get into show business, but continued to encourage me and never wavered even when things looked pretty dim – as they did more than once. Being from Arkansas, she was an incredibly good cook – all of my close buddies, from Dan Simmons, “Little” Bob Davis and Kenny Miller were always welcomed to dine with us, usually on a Saturday or Sunday evening.

I met a young guy from Canada in the late 50s named Steve Balazs. I was dating a gal named Ilsa Alberneze. She was a widow with a very young son, named Mark. She was German and married an air force officer stationed in Germany. A short time after Mark was born, her husband was killed in a plane crash. So she brought the boy to live in the states. Anyway, we were very busy at Lippert’s, knocking out 20 to 25 pictures a year. Ilsa, who was studying acting at a local drama school, met Steve and they became good friends. Ilsa asked if I could use Steve as he was running out of money and might have to return to Canada. I hired Steve as an assistant and although the job didn’t last too long, it helped bridge a gap for him and we became very close friends.

Back in 1952, while awaiting my discharge from the service at camp Roberts, California, a soldier stopped by to see me and asked if (when I got out) I would meet a guy who was a close friend of his brother’s. He said this brother was in an acting class with this guy named Ronald Rice and he and his brother thought Ron had a great future if he could get a break. I told him that I couldn’t help this guy as I had been gone for two years and didn’t know if I could get a job myself.

This didn’t deter him and at least once a week he would drop by my office at camp and ask me to just meet this fellow. Finally, just to get him off my back, I said okay. Felix was his name, he said that Ron was doing a play at a local drama school and maybe I could catch it when I went home this weekend. I went, on what was a precious Saturday night at home to get Felix off my back, and saw the play.

Ronald Rice was a handsome, young man in a very masculine way and looked not unlike Gordon MacRae. However, I could tell that he needed some work, dramatically speaking. I met him after the play, told him if I could ever do something for him – I would. I got his phone number and that was that.

A couple of months later, after my discharge, I began producing and directing plays back at Rainbow Studios. I was doing “John Loves Mary” and auditioned several actors for the lead part of John, but no one really pleased me. I was ready to cast one of the guys that I felt was the best of the bunch when all of a sudden, I thought of Rice.

I thought, with young aspiring actors in Hollywood, Rice – like most of the others had moved at least once or maybe more times. After all, it had to be at least two or three months later. Anyway, I called Ron, he still had his original number, and invited him to read for me over the phone. He came right over and I could tell from his reading that he had promise. I knew I could work with him and get a solid performance.

That was the beginning of a very long friendship. Today, we are still buddies and after nearly fifty years, we still see each other, occasionally.

Ron did a one man show, *Thomas Paine*, at colleges and universities. I got Ron a small part in one of our movies around 1957-'58. It got him his SAG card and a foot in the door. He wanted to change his name for he thought “Rice” was too average. We kicked around a lot of names, but the ones I like he didn't and vice versa. Finally, I said, “What about Foster? That was my mom's maiden name as well as my oldest brother's.” He said, “That's it.” And so was born Ronald Foster, movie actor.

He went on to star in several Eddie Small movies and I used him in one of my shows titled *House of the Damned*. He became, in my opinion, a very good actor, but he never thought of himself that good and slowly faded from pictures and television.



CHAPTER 33

From 1960 thru 1965, I produced or produced/directed 19 movies at Lippert/Fox. In 1965, I went to Greece for Universal, to direct a picture entitled *The Naked Brigade* starring Ken Scott and Shirley Eaton, who had just come off *Goldfinger*. She was the girl painted gold. It was mid-summertime and although we were housed in comfort, our shooting locations were miserable. As most everyone knows, Greece is mainly rock with very little greenery of any kind. On locations, out in the Tules, we would try to get some relief from the olive trees, but the flies were so bad that you had to put a paper sack around you food and open a little at a time to draw out one bit at a time.

We stayed at the Hilton in downtown Athens and I had the occasion to go to the 1,800-year-old Herod Atticus Amphitheater at the Acropolis to see a Greek tragedy with the Greek Chorus. I sat in the ancient rock seat that Greeks sat in centuries ago.

One Sunday, Shirley and I drove for several hours up to Delphi. We drove across the Elysian Fields toward Mt. Olympus. Delphi, which sits on the slope of the mountain and the arena, or open theatre, was still fairly much intact. The remains of the oracles abodes, with their small empty pools, were interesting to say the least. I sat down in one of the many remaining seats at the site and could feel a presence of ancient people around me. Shirley said she had a similar feeling.

The movies that I did for Lippert/Fox were all written by our in-house story editor/writer. Harry Spalding was a past master at coming up with good workable scripts written around some of Lippert's more exploitative titles. We worked very close together on everything from budget to locations to casting and, not the least of all, the overall production. We strived very hard to put as much production value on the screen as humanly possible. I will tell you that we gave Fox almost two dollars worth of value for every one of their dollars. We were really an unbeatable team and I loved every minute of it. I can't speak for Spalding, but I'm sure he enjoyed it, too. Harry went on to work with Disney and I'm sure he did very well there, for he was a very talented man.

The group of pictures I did from 1959 to 1964 for Lippert/Fox were all small unpretentious film that were meant to entertain and fill a space alongside the larger, more prominent movies. We went out of our way to make sure that we never intentionally offended or insulted our audience's sensibilities. We used some of the day's best actors. Someone said to me, years later, that some of them were so-called "has-beens." I replied, instantly and firmly, that people like Kent Taylor and Willard Parker, may have had their day in the sun, but at this point they were well seasoned, intelligent

professionals whom I considered a privilege to know and work with. The younger group like Ken Scott, Robert Dix and Merry Anders, were talented performers as well as being totally nice people.

Merry Anders, my favorite leading lady, always turned in a solid performance with great ease. We worked together on several of my films and I thoroughly enjoyed our relationship.

Another I used often was Russ Bender. I had known Russ several years before Lippert/Fox. I first met him at Hank McCune's series, and we became good friends. One day, Russ told me that he had started doing some acting. I later found out that he would rather act than write. I had remembered that, and I started using Russ. Much to my surprise, he was quite a good actor. I used him in several films before he died of a strange illness. I never did find out what it was. His wife, Vera, and I remained good friends for years after that.

CHAPTER 34

After returning from Greece and Spain, I had a dry spell for about a year. The studio manager at California Studios, John Locke, set me up with a guy named Jim Gabor. Gabor had written a script titled *Jim-Jim*. He had taken a suite of offices at the studio and was seeking a producer/director for his project. It was to be a TV pilot that he would finance personally and try to sell it to the networks. John Locke had checked him out and told me that he was legit. I negotiated my salary and went to work. I broke down the script and set a schedule and hired a crew and cast. His bank was in Canada and the checks we were given were drawn on that bank. My bank wouldn't pay until the checks cleared. It seems totally impossible, but on the strong background that he presented, and John Locke's checking him out, we began shooting.

Halfway thru the show, my bank called and said that after waiting the past weeks, they finally got in touch with Gabor's bank in Canada and were told that he had closed his account – three weeks before. When confronted with this information, Gabor said that he was in the process of transferring his funds to a bank in NYC, where the majority of his money was. He said to have our banks send our checks to this new bank. He gave us the bank and his account number in New York.

We only had a few days to shoot, so we went on and finished the show. Our banks called us a few days later and told us our checks were returned *again* for “insufficient funds. The New York bank said there were only a few dollars in the bank. I called Gabor, who was living in a high-priced condo in Santa Ana and he said that he would meet me, along with John Locke, the next day at the studio and personally bring money orders to cover all the outstanding checks. I threatened him with the police, but he guaranteed me he would be there. Needless to say, he never showed up.

We called the police and a few days later, they found that Gabor had left town with no forwarding address. A few days after that, the bunko squad called and said that, after running a check on Gabor, they discovered that he was a well-known bunko artist and had just been released from prison, after serving several years for a number of things – including just about every “con job” possible.

He must have also been nuts because we had the film, albeit, it was no good to anyone so he must have gotten a vicarious thrill out of putting us all through that – lesson learned.

About six months later, a fellow that I had met while doing a show entitled *Raiders Beneath The Sea* named Burt Topper called. At the end of shooting *Raiders*, I needed some additional underwater scenes with Ken Scott and Russ Bender in wet suits to

bridge some scenes already shot. Burt had a boat – a converted sub chaser and he volunteered to take me and the actors plus a cameraman over to Catalina Island for a couple of days of post-production shooting. I didn't have enough money left in the budget to take a union camera crew, so I hired Fouad Said (pronounced Saaeed), an Egyptian guy who was doing a lot of filming around town on the Q.T.

When we started to shoot, we all got into our wet suits and dove into the crystal clear water at Catalina Island. I was holding Said as he panned the actors – left to right, right to left, etc. After about 10 minutes, Said indicated that he wanted to go up to the surface, so we all did. When I hired Said, I asked if he had ever done any underwater photography and he assured me that he had – “Yes! Definitely!!” When we got to the surface, Said began removing the “Airi” (camera) from the waterproof container and reversed the position of same. Then I realized the he had loaded the camera in *BACKWARDS* and that he had been photographing himself! However, once the situation was corrected, we got all the shots we needed and Said did, after all, a very good job.

CHAPTER 35

A couple of years later, Burt Topper called me. He was doing some pictures at American International and was also doing production management for the company. He asked me if I would be interested in making some films for American International, on an independent basis. I was delighted, for I hadn't done anything for about a year and things were getting a little short in the bank account.

I met with Jim Nicholson, Sam Arkoff's partner, and we made a four-picture deal. I was to have total autonomy, except for final screenplay and they would okay casting. My company would have total control of each product from start thru the final post-production, including delivering an answer print to the studio. I opened offices in the crossroads of the world, a complex sitting right in the heart of Hollywood, on Sunset and McCadden.

In 1959, I had met a fellow named Hank Tani. He was of Japanese descent and originally from Hawaii. At the time, we were dating roommates and sometimes we would double date. Anyway, we became very good friends. I had used Hank as an associate producer on some of the later films that I did at Lippert's, as he had a degree in accounting and design. He became invaluable to me. So, when I set up my new company, he was the first person I hired.

Back in the early 60s, he was also one of my mom's "boys" who was invited to dinner quite often – along with Dan Simmons, Kenny Miller and Ron Foster, to name a few. Hank became very close to Mom and I was glad because she had never been around any Orientals and, being from the South, I wasn't sure how she would react to Hank. Like everything else I loved about her – she took Hank to heart right away and until the day she died, Hank had become very dear to her. Hank and I were the last, of all the friends and family, to see her alive – she died several hours after our last visit with her in the hospital.

CHAPTER 36

The first show that I did for AIP was *Maryjane*, a script about teens smoking marijuana. There was nothing salacious or offensive about it, but it did have some provocative scenes that showed the results of overindulging and the risks taken when someone needs “a fix.” The picture starred Fabian and Diane McBain. The film did very well at the box office, although, it was far from a big hit. I used the Doheny Mansion in Beverly Hills for some scenes. The stark beauty of the estate set against the ramblings of a young “user” was, I thought, quite effective. *Maryjane* was shot entirely in the Hollywood area – using mostly “live” or real sets.

One of the successes we had with all of the Lippert product was staying away from studios and their expensive overhead. We put a lot more quality in the films because the money went on the screen and not to the studios.

The second film for AIP was in 1968, entitled *The Young Animals* – later changed to *Born Wild*. It starred Tom Nardini and Patty McCormick. We shot the picture in its entirety in Tucson, Arizona, where I had shot several films during the Lippert period. We cast A. Martinez as a Mexican teen. It was his first film. The story centered around a small group of white teenagers determined to rid their school of a newly-transferred student who was Mexican (played by Nardini). Although there were Mexican/American students in the school – they were a minority and “knew their place.”

The final scenes were shot in an “airplane graveyard” where the World War Two obsolete planes of all kinds were “chopped up” like little cucumbers on a chopping block. There was a solid steel blade, not unlike a single razor blade in appearance, but measured somewhere about two feet deep and 12 feet long. A huge crane would lift the blade on a cable about 40 feet in the air and drop it like a ton of bricks. The first cut was the fuselage. The blade would cut off the nose section like it was warm butter. Next they made two cuts at the midsection and finally, the tail section was lopped off.

The bad guys had chased Nardini and Patty McCormick into the area during a car chase and they took refuge in a huge B-51 bomber. The lead heavy was played by David Macklin (whose father owned a salvage company, so he knew how to operate the crane). He hoisted the giant blade in the air and started chopping the huge plane into pieces – warning them that they could, “come out now, or be carried out in little pieces.”

I placed the camera inside the plane, about 20 feet from the first cut and placed Tom and Patty between the blade cut and the camera. You could see the blade slice off the nosepiece of the plane as the actors kept running back toward the rear of the plane. We

made three more slices, each with the actors in the foreground, until nothing was left but the tail section. Tom and Patty were left standing, holding each other tightly as the camera pulled back to a high, wide angle, seeing the twosome standing on the ledge of the open end of the tail section about 30 feet above the ground.

Now, I know this sounds unsafe and dangerous, but after consulting with the people who did this work, I was told that they had never had an accident in all the years they had been doing this. The blade was so heavy and sharp, that once it began its “free fall,” the weight took it directly to the ground. The aluminum-covered planes were like butter and offered no resistance.

Another time, I needed about 300 to 400 school kids to form a picket line at the local high school, but really couldn't afford more than about a hundred or so. I started a radio and newspaper campaign to recruit all of these kids. They would work for three days at the school for minimum wage and at the end of the third day, we would have a drawing for a brand new car. A local boy won the car and proceeded to wreck it a few days later. He was unhurt – thank God.

Another film I did for AIP was *Hell's Belles*, around 1970. It was the second so-called “Biker Pic” I did. The first was in 1968 entitled *The Mini-Skirt Mob* starring Jeremy Slate, Diane McBaine, Patty McCormick, Sherry Jackson, Ross Hagen and Harry Dean Stanton. We had some nice bike action scenes and of all the films I did at AIP, *The Mini-Skirt Mob* did the most at the box office. I'm still receiving some money after all these years. I retained 10% of the profits after “break even” on all the product I did for AIP.

Hell's Belles, like *The Mini-Skirt Mob* was shot entirely on location in and around Tucson, Arizona. Both stories were basically Westerns. We traded the horses for motorcycles. *Hell's Belles* starred Adam Roarke, Jeremy Slate and Jocelyn Lane. I recall the first scene of the first day of shooting, out in the desert area near Tucson. I had staged a long scene with the principals around a campfire. After a rehearsal, we went for a take. They were about half through the scene and Adam Roarke blew a line and said, “Cut it! Cut it!” I came out of my chair like a shot and grabbed Adam by the arm and quickly led him a little way, from the group. I pulled his nose inches from mine and said, “Who in the hell do you think you are?! There is only one person on this, or any other company, that cuts the camera and that is the director... yours truly... if you ever so much as think about doing that again, I'll have your ass on a plane back to L.A. before you have time to pack you bags. Now get back there – do what I'm paying you to do – act! I'll direct!”

We shot the scene and Adam never forgot a line. After I made the next set up, Adam asked if he could talk with me. We walked a few steps away and he said the he was really sorry for what happened and that he would never do it again. He said, "You're the first guy that I've ever worked with that had 'balls,' and I really respect you for that." Before we wrapped the film, Adam and I became very close friends. He was actually a fine actor and nice person.

We had some outstanding bike action in *Hell's Belles*, but that didn't take away from good performances by the three principals. Jeremy Slate, to me, was a very underrated actor. Even in the thin lined characters that he played in *The Mini-Skirt Mob* and *Hell's Belles*, he still gave sincere and believable performances.

While shooting *Hell's Belles*, around the third week or so, I got the flu and my temperature rose dangerously high. We were to shoot a major sequence in a cave where Jeremy Slate and Bill Lucking, the lead heavy, got into a "knock down and drag out" fight and wind up in a cave, still fighting a long, drawn-out fight sequence. Lucking was getting the upper hand. (He was a very large guy and compared to Jeremy, it as really no contest.) Anyway, Slate hits him hard and Lucking rolls into a nest of rattlesnakes. He is stunned by the blow and before he can regain his composure, the rattlesnakes all begin striking him all over his body. Very quickly, he was dead.

I was able to borrow about six or seven real rattlers from the desert museum near Tucson and together, with the real-looking rubber snakes that we brought from Hollywood, we faked the scene very well. I put a large piece of Plexiglas in front of the lens and the man from the museum taunted the real snakes and they began to coil and strike at the camera, hitting the Plexiglas with a vengeance. We then took the rubber snakes, on fine thread, and had them make contact many times on Lucking's backside. By the time we finished the sequence, it was wrap time and we all headed back to the hotel.

After a shower, I began to feel dizzy and all but collapsed. Hank Tani and Bobby Jones called a doctor and he said that I was sick with a flu infection and was running a dangerously high temperature. The doctor told me to stay in bed for a couple of days and take the medicine that he would prescribe. I said no – that I was not only the producer/director, but for every day that I went over schedule (budget) the cost would come out of my profits.

I insisted that he give me as much medication as was legal and safe to get me through the night. However, come hell or high water, I would be working tomorrow. I don't know what he gave me, but he shot my butt full of several different drugs and I fell asleep right away.

The alarm woke me the next morning at 6 am and I jumped in the shower to get fully awake and then called Bobby Jones and Hank Tani to my room. I told them that I felt much better. The fever was down a lot and I knew we were half day behind. During the night, I had figured out exactly how to shoot the “Snake Sequence” and I could do it in a few hours and put us back on schedule. They both looked nonplussed and Bobby said, “Boss, we shot all of that sequence yesterday, and we *are* on schedule.” I started to argue the point, but Hank joined in and told me exactly how I had shot it. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing! I must have been somewhat delirious that day due to the high fever. I swear I did not remember shooting any part of that sequence!

After *Hell’s Belles*, in 1969-’70, Nicholson called and said that AIP had signed a producer/director named Larry Buchanan, from Dallas, Texas, to do a film entitled *A Bullet For Pretty Boy*. It was to be shot entirely in the Dallas area and was to star Fabian, Jocelyn Lane and Adam Roarice. Jim wanted me to go to Dallas and act as Executive Producer, to make sure Larry Brought the film in on schedule and with some amount of quality. Buchanan had previously made several independent small-budgeted films in Dallas and as a writer/producer/director, he had done quite well with them.

I spent weeks in Dallas in the extreme heat of a Texas summer, and knew how thankful I was not to have stayed in Arkansas during my lifetime. The film went along without a hitch and Larry delivered a nice film. AIP and I thought it was too slow and talky, after my editor and I came out of a “rough cut.” A few weeks later, I took a small contingency of people from Hollywood and returned to Dallas with stunt doubles and the actors and shot several scenes involving action. We cut the new material in and we thought it helped the film overall. Larry died in January 2005.

CHAPTER 37

I had optioned a script entitled, *The Haunting Of Theresa* – a terrific story of fright and suspense. Jim Nicholson and I thought it would make a good show, so I canvassed the entire coast of California, all the way from the Oregon border to Santa Barbara, looking for the right location.

The story was laid in a small fishing village on Cape Cod. The main set was a before the turn-of-the-century, three-story house that set isolated from the village on the tip of the bay. The fourth-story attic had a “widow’s walk” facing the open sea – so-called because in years past, the widows who had lost their men to the sea, would continue to go there and wait for hours hoping that the men would return. Of course, some never did.

The story involved a young girl of 18 or so, who came from England to stay with the only inhabitant in the house – two old maid aunts. It seemed that when the girl’s mother and sister of the two women, ran off at a young age, and married a sailor (against her mother and sister’s will), they disowned her. Now, some 20 years later, the woman’s child comes to stay in the house that had condemned her own mother. Soon after her arrival, weird things begin to happen to her. She accuses the aunts of trying to scare her so she will leave. She sees a ghost figure in a sweeping gown walking on the “widow’s walk.” Other really bizarre things happen before we get to the terrifically exciting twist ending.

I was able to reach Susan Hayward on a personal basis and I wanted her for the younger, but stronger part of one of the aunts. I thought it was a powerful role and needed a Susan Hayward to make it work. Anyway, when I spoke to her by phone, she thanked me for my interest, but said that after the final few minutes of the film, no one would remember that she was in it, because the young girl’s scenes were too overpowering.

Without a name, AIP didn’t want to go ahead with the film and in those days, there weren’t any real names in the teen category. The film was shelved, and I decided to end my association with AIP. I felt that at this point in my career, I should try to elevate my work or get out of the business.

CHAPTER 38

I sold my home in the Hollywood Hills, and moved out in the Tules to Ventura County. I twisted my best buddy, Hank Tani's and after much discussion, he decided to move out with me to what, I'm sure he thought, was oblivion. With nothing in sight career wise, I was slowly going down the drain. Hank got a job selling furniture at a large company and started paying some of the bills. After six months, I was falling back in my bills, namely the house and car. Hank was making enough to keep body and soul together, but the big bills were slowly closing in on me. I was close to losing the house and my car and really had no options open to save them.

Hank suggested that maybe I should bury by pride and call my friend, Bobby Jones, who was working at Metromedia as a first assistant director. Bobby was my first assistant director on the films that I had done for AIP and we became fast friends during those years. Hank was right about "pride," for having done so much work as a producer/director, it was really difficult to think about lowering my so-called prestige and try to get a job as a production assistant or lower. I guess I kind of chewed Hank out for even suggesting that I would consider such a thing.

As the days went on and "the wolf was getting closer to the door," I had started to rethink my position. I called the Directors Guild and said that I wanted to go to work as an assistant director. I was told that I had to have X amount of directing time before I was eligible to drop in my category, and then only as a second assistant director, not a first. I certainly qualified for a second assistant, but my ego was totally deflated. After much soul searching, I took the advice from my good friend Hank, and put a call in for Bobby Jones at Metromedia. I told Bobby my plans and there was a very long pause. Finally, I said "Bobby, are you there?" He said, "Yeah boss, yeah." He called me "Boss" for years. Finally, he said, "Let me see what I can do." Another long pause, and I hung up. I was furious with myself and also with Hank for talking me into calling. Hank was at work and when he returned late in the afternoon, I told him what had transpired with Jones and said, "I told you so! I should have never humbled myself, for Bobby sounded like he couldn't really care."

I remember a sleepless night – lying awake thinking I had better get my act together and stop feeling sorry for myself. When morning came, I got up and dressed to go out and find myself a job... any kind of job.

Before I left the house, the phone rang – it was Bobby Jones. This was a Thursday morning and Bobby asked if I could come to work on Monday morning. I was taken completely back. I thanked him profusely and he said that he was sorry for his casual

conversation yesterday, but that he was completely stunned and didn't know what to say. He immediately went in to see the boss and got me the job. A job, I found out over the next few days, that was created for me.

They were doing TV shows, but on tape, not film. They used remote equipment and shot all over town in real sets – just like film – but they were a tape outfit. I knew nothing about tape and they didn't need a second assistant director, because they had floor managers, stage managers, etc. Everyone needed to do a tape show. I was given some paperwork to do in order to justify my salary. It took me a couple of days to really catch on, but I was so grateful for the job, I just tried to make sure I did everything I could to show how much I appreciated the job.

My first week's salary went toward saving my car. The second week's toward the mortgage on the house. A few weeks later, I had caught up on all of the bills that were in arrears and finally, had a couple of bucks left over. However, at about the same time, the company stopped making the shows and I was one again unemployed.

About a week or so later, Bobby Jones called and told me that Metromedia was about to begin shooting a new half-hour TV series entitled *Dusty's Trail*. It was to star Bob Denver from *Gilligan's Island* and an old friend, Forrest Tucker. I had worked with "Tuck" on a couple of early Lippert/Fox pictures when I was in production with the company. Bobby said that I was going to be the second assistant director, and he of course would be the first assistant director. This was a film project and was right up my alley.

I went in to the company and met with Bobby Jones, Jerry Wineman, assistant to Joe Wonder, the company production manager. When Bobby told me that Jerry Wineman was one of the bosses, I thought my fate was doomed – for a couple of years before – when I was doing the AIP shows in Tucson – he was a driver on my company and he did something I didn't like (I can't recall exactly what), but I fired him on the spot and sent him back to Hollywood on a plane. I didn't tell Bobby because he was my first assistant director, so I assumed he remembered.

I walked into the production offices of Metromedia on the Sunset Strip, early the next morning and saw Bobby and Jerry Wineman. Jerry greeted me like a long lost friend and, to say the least, I was both shocked and pleased.

We started shooting *Dusty's Trail* at Fox Studios on one of their largest soundstages. The storyline was about a group of pioneers going West with Denver and "Tuck" playing scouts. The entire show was shot on stage (one stage), so they kept moving the greens to give a new look, as they proceeded West. We also were shooting two episodes

a week — one every two and a half days. After our initial meeting at Metromedia, I left to return a few days later to begin preparing for the shoot. That was on a Thursday. I was to begin working the next Monday.

Friday, Jerry Wineman called and told me that he was really sorry, but that I no longer had the job. It seems that Denver wanted his own second assistant director who had worked with him on *Gilligan's Island*, and as we all know in our business, the Star usually get his way. Jerry said that he and Bobby Jones both fought for me, but to no avail. I thanked him and hung up, totally disgusted and disillusioned. Hank Tani came home from work and I had to tell him the bad news and the two of us just sat and stared at each other. I was certainly thankful that my good and faithful friend told me to keep my chin up and after all, he was still working.

I didn't sleep much that night. Lying awake with mixed emotions, thinking how I really needed that job and could understand that Denver certainly had a right to use his own man. As I sat having my coffee early the next morning (Saturday), the phone rang and it was Jerry Wineman. He said, "Forget about the call I made yesterday. Everything has changed and you're to report to work at 8 am Monday morning." He hung up and I sat there ecstatic, but totally bewildered.

When I arrived at work on Monday, I was assigned an office and started to work. Nothing was ever discussed about Denver's man, but I learned a little later from Wineman, that late in the day on that Friday, Bobby Jones went in to the Powers That Be and told them that if they couldn't use me, they couldn't use him! He said, "Get yourself a new first assistant director to go with you new second assistant director." He walked out! Bobby was the "fair-haired boy" at Metromedia and they did not want to lose him, so they reluctantly relinquished their position.

I never told Bobby that I found out about his stand, for I knew he would be embarrassed and upset that someone told me about it. He was "something else," and still is.

As I said, Forrest Tucker was a total professional. He was the first actor on the set. I would arrive around 6 – 6:30 am for an eight o'clock shoot. Most of the time, "Tuck" was sitting in his high-back canvas chair – already in makeup and wardrobe. We talked over earlier times and I enjoyed working with such a "pro" and down to earth person. He was a pure delight.

Conversely, Mr. Denver was something else. He, quite naturally, held a grudge against me for not getting his own man and I understood that. I worked extremely hard to justify my job, but he kept rubbing my nose in it. By the end of the day, he was

generally – let’s just say, on “cloud nine.” I never bothered to find out how he got that way; I stayed away from him most of the time.

After a few weeks of shooting, one day at wrap time, Bobby asked if I would drive Denver home. I lived in Thousand Oaks and he at Lake Sherwood, a few miles out of my way. I agreed. He had driven to the studio as he always had, but now, he needed a ride home. I can only state that there was nothing wrong with his car. He was muttering sarcasms most of the way home. I felt like opening the door and kicking him out, but discretion being the better part of valor – I gritted my teeth and closed my ears. When I had to address him I called him Sire. It was my way of sarcastically referring to him as “King Denver.” He never caught on and one day, he asked me why I referred to him as “Sire,” and I stated that it was really Sir with an “E” added. He seemed satisfied.

After a couple of months on the show, Joe Wonder’s assistant, Robert Papazian, came on the set and told me and Bobby Jones that the company was going to do some movies of the week. Papazian had heard from Joe and Bobby about my extensive production background and Papazian said he wanted me to start on a project right away, as a first assistant director. I was more than grateful, but told him that according to the Directors Guild rules, when I stepped down from a director to a second assistant director, I would have to stay in that category for at least one year. Papazian left and I was really sad, but at least I was still working.

The next day, word came to the set that Joe Wonder wanted me in his office right away. As I said earlier, Joe was the company’s head of production, but as of that time, I had not even met the man. I sat across the desk from Joe, with Papazian next to me.

Joe said, “I’ve seen your extensive background in this business and can’t believe you don’t want to be promoted to help us out.” I replied, “Of course I want the promotion, but Morrie Abrahms at the Guild told me, in no uncertain terms, that I would stay in this capacity for at least one year.” Joe told his secretary to get Abrahms on the phone.

He told Abrahms that he was elevating me to first assistant. There was a long pause. Then, Joe said, “Listen, don’t tell me about the rules! I’m a charter member and I helped write them! Dexter is no Johnny-Come-Lately. He deserves the promotion, but more importantly, we need him! He begins work here today and if you try to stop him, Metromedia will take you and the Guild to court and tie you up for years... period!!” He hung up without waiting for an answer, turned to me and said, “Find any office and work closely with Papazian here.” I’ll always be grateful to Joe Wonder for that.

The first show I did on my own was a one-hour afternoon special entitled *My Father Lives In A Downtown Hotel*, starring Beau Bridges and young Ike Isenmann. The

director was a new guy from NY named Jeremy Kagan. It was his first film and after he would shoot a master scene, he would turn to me and say, "I want to make two inserts." We did inserts at an insert lab in post-production – so I didn't know what he was talking about. Finally, when he "finger framed" a close up, we figured it out. I told him, nicely, that the film term was "close up," not "insert." He continued to say "insert"... I rest my case.

Young Isenmann was around 12 years of age, so we had to employ a welfare worker (school teacher). This guy was something else. Now, the rules for minors in our industry are very strict, as they should be. Doing film show, the costs are so high and the schedules are always tight, so when you have a minor, who's in nearly every scene, you have to bend the rules ever so slightly – sometimes. This old geezer was strictly "by the book."

One day, we were shooting our final scene for the day on Wilshire Boulevard. We had 10 minutes and the boy was to get on a local bus. (The bus, the driver, etc. were ours.) Cameras were set, we rolled, the bus pulled up, the boy got on and the bus was panned down the street and out of shot. The driver was instructed to go to the first block, turn right, circle two blocks and return the boy and bus back to us. It was 4:20 pm and traffic was really heavy.

The bus didn't get back to us until 4:33 and the boy's time was up at 4:30. The driver said the traffic was too heavy to get back any sooner. The teacher started raising hell with me because we had kept the boy three minutes over his allotted time and threatened to pull the boy off the show, and we still had several days of shooting to do with him! I was incensed! We had fulfilled our obligation by finishing the boy "on camera" before 4:30 so the extra few minutes on the bus was not work, but a bus ride... period! I threatened to sue the teachers union and also the teacher if he even suggested "pulling the boy."

That was the end of that, but a few days later, the "insert director" got upset over some minor production snafu and started yelling obscenities, in the presence of the minor. This time, my defenses were down and I lectured the director to stop the cursing or the teacher would have every right to "pull the boy" off the show. It was my first job as a first assistant director and his as a director. Hopefully, we both learned something.

The second show I did was a MOW entitled *A Message For My Daughter* starring Martin Sheen and Bonnie Bedelia. The director was also a newcomer to Hollywood named Robert Lewis. Papazian wanted me on the project because, like Kagan, Lewis was fairly new to film. He said Lewis wanted to personally interview me to decide if I

was right for him. Frankly, this nettled me a little, but one of the stipulations that I had with Papazian when I took the job was that no director that I worked with would know of my experience as a producer/director. Knowing the egos in Hollywood as I did, I knew that no director, young or old, wanted his first assistant to have equal or more knowledge than themselves.

I met with Lewis and he seemed to be quite a nice person. After some small talk, he asked me a direct question, “What makes you think you’re good enough for this job, and what makes you think you’re good enough to work with me?!” I was a little taken back, but kept my composure and instantly said, “Mr. Lewis, what makes you think that you’re a good enough director to make this project successful and what makes you think that you’re good enough to have me work with *you*?!!” There was a long pause and he said, “Welcome to the project!”

He rose, shook my hand, thanked me for coming and said he looked forward to working together. We did the show and it was a very pleasant experience.

CHAPTER 39

When I finished *Message*, I was called into a production meeting with Joe Wonder, Jerry Wineman, Bob Papazian and Bobby Jones. The company had started preparing a new MOW. It was a General Electric special about the life of Roy Campanella, entitled *It's Good To Be Alive*. That was late in 1973. Bobby Jones had been preparing the show for a few weeks and all of the locations had been picked and the casting, etc. were done.

They had chosen Michael Landon as the director because, as I understood it, GE liked his directorial work on *Bonanza* and his name gave the project an additional plus. This was a prestigious project for GE and Metromedia was doing everything to keep it that way. During the meeting, I was asked to work on the show as a second assistant director.

Joe Wonder told me that he wanted to have added protection in having two first assistant directors in Bobby and me. He said that I would still be paid first assistant's salary. Of course, I agreed and went to work, technically as a second assistant director.

We started shooting about a week later. I, personally, had not seen any of the locations we were to use, so I just followed the company around in the dark. The show was very heavy with local locations and very few days on a studio lot. The first week, as I recall, shooting was at the Long Beach Naval Hospital. We were scheduled to shoot on several different floors of the building. It didn't go well.

The first day, we were several stories up and lunch was called. I remember we all had a hell of a time trying to find the commissary. We wandered around until someone came to our rescue. At the end of the second week, we were several days behind and that Friday evening, we were shooting at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena. We were scheduled to finish at 11 pm in order to wrap and be gone before midnight. The next day, being Saturday, if we worked just on minute past 12 am, the crew would be entitled to an extra day's salary, plus even more, because it was not a regular day, but part of a weekend.

Bobby Jones had been told, in no uncertain terms, that Landon was to be treated with great care and to, by no means, "push him." Bobby took them literally and let Michael have his "space and time."

It was around 11:50 pm (at the Rose Bowl) and Landon was lining up a shot of the ball players giving a tribute to Campanella. Dick Berg, the executive producer, Gerry Eisenberg, the line producer and Bob Papazian were all on the sidelines, watching the filming. One by one, they approached Bobby trying to find out how much more Landon had to do, as time was running out.

Finally, Bobby walked up to Landon – who had just taken the handheld camera in his hand and was going to “walk the shot” himself – and asked very softly, “When are we going to be ready?” Landon replied, without taking his eye away from the camera, “When I say we’re ready.” Most of the “Brass” heard Landon’s reply, as I did.

Bobby walked away and a couple of minutes later, he rolled the camera. The shot was over about three minutes to midnight and Bobby called a wrap. All of us gave a sigh of relief and started packing up to leave.

Earlier in the day, we had met at Metromedia with Landon, Ted Voightlander, the director of photography, and me. We rode out to the Rose Bowl in Bobby Jones’ car. After the wrap, Bobby and I walked out to the parking lot to his car and he got in and started the engine. “I said what about Landon and Voightlander?” He said, “Let them walk.” I got in and we drove off leaving the twosome standing inside the Bowl. I found out later that Landon and Voight got a ride back to the office in one of the company’s trucks.

During the drive back to the office, where my car was, Bobby didn’t say much – nor did I. I knew he was very upset about Landon’s remark so I opted to talk of other things – small talk mainly. I didn’t get home to Thousand Oaks until around 1:30 am.

The next morning, Sunday, about 10:30 am, I was awakened by the phone. It was Bob Papazian. He told me that Bobby Jones had called him earlier in the day and said that he was quitting. Papazian had been on the phone since early morning trying to talk him out of it. Papazian said that Jones was adamant and would not work another hour with Landon, period!

He told Papazian to talk me into taking over the show. I knew that Bobby Jones was a sensitive guy and that Landon had emasculated him in front of his bosses. So I wasn’t about to agree to replacing him and I told Papazian that, instantly. He then asked me to call Jones and try to get him to reconsider.

I waited until about 2 pm and finally telephoned him. He would not budge from his decision and finally, I told him that, “once you walk off of a show in mid-schedule, you may never work again... if word gets around.” That didn’t phase him, and he kept saying that he would never leave if I were not there to take over. He said numerous times that if I stayed, he could, in all consciousness, leave the production.

After nearly three straight hours on the phone, I called Papazian and said that I would take the reins. The one stipulation was that we would meet early Monday morning at the office, with Michael, and I would express my views on how I would run the shooting company. I found out later that Gerry Eisenberg, the producer, called Bobby

on Sunday and offered to get Landon to apologize to him, but Jones said no. Looking back, I doubt that Landon would have done so anyway.

On Monday morning, Landon, Voightlander, Papazian and I met in the office at Metromedia. It was the first real face-to-face meeting with Michael, for until now, I had stayed very much in the background. I really don't think he knew me, or what I did for the company. I said the following: "I'm taking this assignment on behalf of Metromedia and Bobby Jones. I'm a person when taking over a project, does just that – 'takes over.' I will run this unit and make all production decisions as well as, but not limited to, getting this unit back on track, on schedule and on budget. I'm a takeover person and I intend to do just that – take over." There wasn't even a pause – Landon put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Let's go to work."

At that time, the unit was three days behind schedule and thousands of dollars over budget. We had eight days left on the schedule and I was dubious about making up any lost time. By the end of the first day's shooting with Michael, I had the feeling we were going to make headway. Ted Voightlander was a very nice man and an excellent cameraman, but he was out to get an Emmy and would take forever to light a relatively small set. I started pushing him and although it was an uphill battle, I finally got through to him that I wasn't going to let up. Michael saw the time being wasted and backed me 100%.

We finished shooting on a stage at 20th Century Fox, just a few weeks before Christmas in 1973. We had made up the lost days and had come in several thousand dollars under the budget. As we wrapped up the production, Landon came to me and gave me a bear hug and had some very nice things to say about me and my ability. He ended by saying that in a few weeks (early January 1974), he was going to shoot a pilot for a new series for NBC entitled *Little House On The Prairie* and that, if it goes to series, I would be working with him – no matter what I was doing. I was more than a little flattered, but thought to myself – "Little Joe" a father and farmer living somewhere out in the boondocks? Good Luck!

In retrospect, I could see the problem regarding the Jones/Landon combination. Bobby was following orders and Michael, who had always had a major network and major studio behind him, was for the first time out in the cold harsh reality of location shooting – not on a soundstage at Paramount with all of its conveniences. He needed, and wanted, someone strong at the helm to run the shooting company, so he could concentrate on directing. I gave him that luxury and he gave me the backing that I required. We were a good team. The show was a critical and ratings success.

I went straight to another MOW entitled *The Companion* starring Amanda Blake, Trish Sterling and Dick Haymes. I had been told, by a so-called reliable source, that Amanda Blake was a troublemaker and a very demanding dame – so be prepared. I remembered an experience a few months before, on a TV series I worked on for Metromedia, entitled *Fire House* starring James Drury, formerly of *The Virginian*. It was a half-hour show, about the men who worked at a fire station.

The first day of shooting at Fox studios, our director was John Florea and he asked for the cast on stage to get a “walk through.” After waiting for 20 minutes, Drury Finally showed up. I had sent my assistant to his motor home (dressing room) several times, but Drury refused to answer the call. Drury came on stage, looked at the set (the Chief’s office) and started to find fault with the set. He opened one of the metal file cabinets and it stuck, ever so slightly. He pulled the sliding file out and threw it against the wall! He began kicking the metal cabinet – yelling all sorts of obscenities! He returned abruptly, and walked back to his motor home outside the stage.

Our director walked over to the script supervisor, looked at the script and proceeded to cut all of Drury’s lines out of the scene. He rehearsed the newly-revised scene with the other actors and we shot it. He began to revise the next scene and Drury walked up and said, “When do we shoot the scene?” Florea said flatly, without looking up, “We shot it.” Drury said, “What about me?” Florea said, “I cut you out of it. But since you’re here, do you want to walk the next scene?” Drury said, “Where do I go?” and walked into the set for a walkthrough. After that, Drury got a little better to work with, but not much. After that, I wasn’t looking forward to working with another Hollywood ego.

I bring this up because nothing about the rumor about Miss Blake was farther from the truth. She was a totally professional actress and a wonderful, down to earth person. We became good friends in a period of just a few weeks. She invited me to spend time with her at her ranch in Arizona, but I never accepted her offer – much to my regret, for she didn’t live long after that time.

I also enjoyed working with a now mature Dick Haymes. He had been one of Hollywood’s “problem boys” at the peak of his career and his reputation would also precede him. Now, well past middle age, newly married with a very young son, he was “Mr. Professional” personified.

I had always liked Dick’s music and have just about everything he recorded. I also was fond of his movies and have most of those on tape. One of the first movies Dick did was at 20th Century Fox called, *Irish Eyes Are Smiling*, based on the life of Ernest Ball, a well-known composer of Irish songs around the turn of the century. I was amazed how good Dick looked and how natural he was as an actor.

In the same film, my very close friend Chuck St. Clair sang a beautiful song during the finale. He had the voice of an angel during that time and also performed in several movies with the Bob Mitchell Boys Choir. I regret never having told Dick Haymes how much I admired his talent. I guess I didn't want to seem like a typical fan, although that's exactly what I was – and still am.

Dick told me that he was in the process of starting his own production company and would like me to consider being head of production for him. I was somewhat overwhelmed at the offer, for we had only worked together a few short weeks. Unfortunately, Dick passed away a short time later. I'll always be grateful to him for his confidence in me based on such a short relationship.

With about a week left to shoot on *The Companion*, I returned home from our location in Malibu, and Hank Tani told me that Michael Landon's office called and wanted me to call back – no matter how late I arrived home. It was around 8 pm when I called and Michael had left for the day. However, Kent McCray, the company's production manager, told me that the pilot for *Little House* was picked up by NBC and they were going to series right away – to be ready for the season's open in September, 1974.

This was around March of 1974 and Kent told me that Landon wanted me to work with him as a first assistant director on the series. I was totally surprised with the offer first of all, because I never thought that a show like that – plus that title with Landon, would ever see the light of day, and second, I was totally ensconced in my job with Metromedia and Bob Papazian and I had become very close business and personal friends. I told Kent to give me a few days to think it over and he said, "As soon as possible," because he wanted to get his crew locked up.

Hank became, once again, my listening post and someone I could discuss the pros and cons with. He felt, as I did, that Landon and NBC would give me a more permanent place of employment and a certain amount of prestige. I was really thinking more of the continuity of employment, as well as working on a quality show and never having to apologize for my work, in an industry that was slowly going against what I personally stood for – good wholesome entertainment. I had mixed emotions about leaving Metromedia for they had been extremely good to me and that would be hard to walk away from.

My relationship with Papazian had become very dear to me. I loved his wife, Sandy, and their four young sons. I know that Bob Papazian also relied on me to help get the job done and he was rising higher in the company's esteem. So, to say the least, I was in quite a quandary. The next day, when Papazian came by the set out in Malibu, I told him of Landon's offer.

I know he was totally confused and somewhat taken back – not only about how this affected him, but also how to help me make a decision, because I know that down, deep in his heart, he wanted what was best for his good friend. However, I'm sure he had mixed emotions about losing me, for I know he depended on me and was going to feel the loss.

We left the decision open for the time being. Early the next morning, Bob was back on the set in Malibu. He told me that he and his wife had spent a lot of time discussing my dilemma while lying in bed prior to sleeping and that Sandy, finally, told Bob that he should think of my future with Landon and not try to persuade me to stay. Bob said he knew she was right and, as difficult as it was for him, he said that I should certainly take Landon's offer.

CHAPTER 40

When we finished shooting, I went to Paramount Studios and met with Kent McCray regarding the job. He was a very pleasant and efficient man, and I knew I was going to like him right away. After we talked terms and I accepted the job, he introduced me to Haskell B. Boggs – one of the directors of photography on the show. Haskell, “Buzzy” as he is known, had worked with Landon for 15 years on *Bonanza* and before that had worked on hundreds of major motion pictures at Paramount – both as a camera operator and director of photography. Kent told me that I would be working with Buzz and the alternating directors. Ted Voightlander, the other cameraman, would be working with Landon, directing every other episode.

A few months after coming to the Landon Company, Metromedia Inc. closed down all operations regarding filmmaking. The entire film arm of the company, including Bob Papazian, was looking for jobs. Don't tell me that timing isn't everything. Papazian had no trouble and found work right away. A couple of years later, he started his own company and over the next 15 years, became one of the TV industry's leading producing companies of MOWs and network specials. One of the characteristics that Bob had was that, no matter how grim things looked, he never lost his sense of humor. That was one thing that he and I had in common. We could always find time to laugh, even if the joke was on us.

The *Little House* company was housed at Paramount Studios, Stages 31 and 32. The original exterior location for our sets were several acres lying above Woodland Hills, out in the San Fernando Valley. I think that the art director, Trevor Williams, and his construction crew were already building some sets when a citizen's committee, who lived below the set location, got a court order to stop the company from working in that area.

The circus-like equipment, including several overweight trucks and 70 or 80 automobiles for cast and crew, would have to drive through the residential area each morning starting around 5:30 or 6 am. I can understand why they were somewhat hostile to the idea. The stoppage pushed the shooting date for the series back several weeks.

Kent McCray, with the art director and Mike Landon, quickly came up with a new location. It was up in the rolling hills of Simi Valley, just northwest of the San Fernando Valley. It was private property, owned by Newhall Land Co. As I recall, BNC leased the acreage for their new series, *Little House*. That didn't make me mad because I lived in Thousand Oaks at that time and the Simi Valley location was only about 15 miles from my home – unlike the over 40 miles to Paramount.

The Little House, Oleson's Store, Nellie's Restaurant, the feed and seed store, the bank, the hotel and Post Office, as well as Doc Baker's office, were built on the location. Most of the above were duplicated on the stages at Paramount. On average, we would shoot about 60% on stage and the remainder on location. Naturally, every episode varied, but that's a fair percentage.

The first episode on the series was "Hundred Mile Walk." We went on location down to a rock quarry near Hemet in Riverside County. The guest star was Don Knight. Even though I worked on every other episode – alternating with my counterpart, Miles Middough – I worked on the very first one and nearly 10 years later, the very last one.

As an assistant director, I would prepare a new script for eight days, while the company was shooting. Then I would work eight days on the set, while the other assistant director would prepare his incoming episode. The other persons who would alternate were the cinematographer "Buzz" Boggs, as well as the director, William Claxton. Buzz, Bill and I did the first four or five years working together, while Mike, Ted Voightlander and Miles Middough worked together. The vast majority of the crew was brought over from the series *Bonanza* by Mike and Kent McCray. Miles had been with the Bonanza group for a long while and he and most of the crew, let me know, subtly, that I was the new kid on the block. The exception was "Buzz" Boggs and Claxton.

I had worked with Claxton over 10 years before, when I was Bill Megginetti's assistant at Lippert's. Bill Claxton directed several films for us during a three-year period. He was a very strange person, for when I would walk on the set of one of his shows, he would turn and walk away – never even acknowledging my presence. Even though I had a great amount of authority, I always displayed a very low profile. I knew that at my young age, 27 or so, a lot of people resented my authority, so I tried to downplay my status. Anyway, Bill never once acknowledged my being there. When Kent told me that I would be working with Claxton, I thought, "why me?" I certainly didn't think that he would relish this idea, either.

After a few days preparing at the studio, Kent told me to meet him at the Simi location, where the sets were nearly completed. Trevor Williams, the art director, and crew were just finishing up the stream that ran through the town. As I drove up the two-mile winding road to the site, a sports car was in front of me and as we reached the location, the sports car pulled up and stopped. I stopped behind the car and got out. The doors to the sports car opened and out stepped Bill Claxton and his wife, Janet. I took a deep breath and started forward toward the twosome. Bill saw me and said, "Maury, good to see you – Kent told me you were going to be with us. Welcome aboard." Janet gave me a hug and the three of us walked up a little farther to meet McCray. I was completely taken back and thought, "Will wonders never cease?"

I had a very long and positive relationship with Bill Claxton, even though he maintained a certain aloofness during those years that we worked so closely together. I discovered very quickly in the early years that Bill's aloofness was not directed to me, but to the entire cast and crew. He was a very nice man and a solid director, but he had difficulty being very social. It was rare, indeed, to get "a rise" out of him – although I worked at doing just that. Every so often, I could get him to laugh, sometimes at himself.

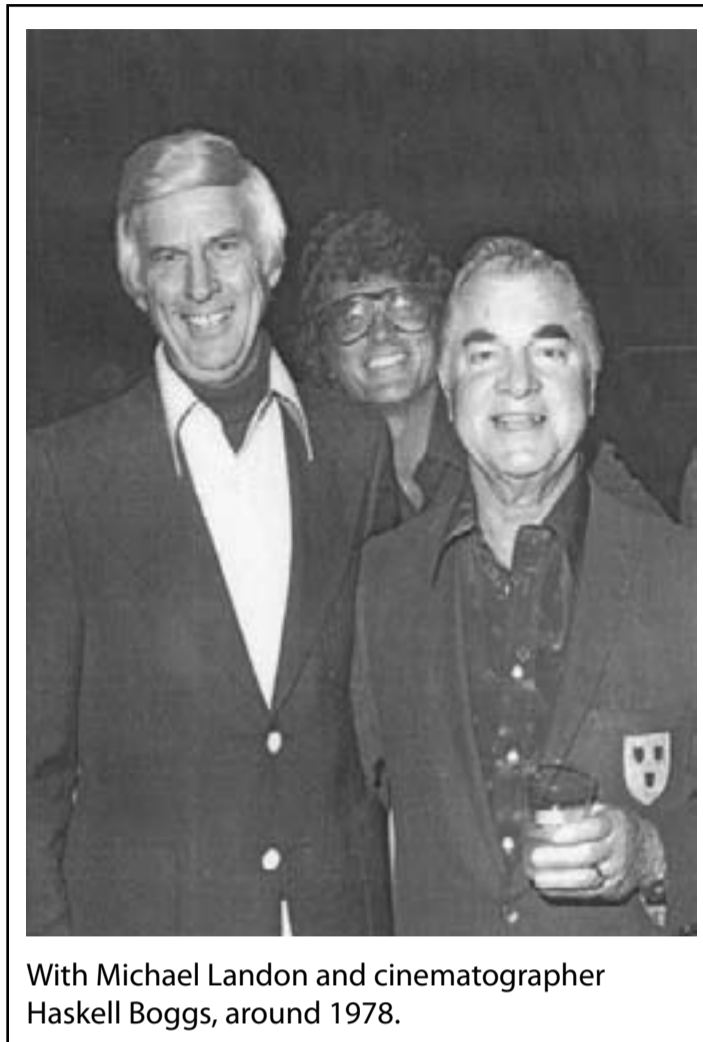
Stating earlier, regarding being the "new kid on the block", the second episode that I did while shooting at the Simi location, involved a short move from the heart of the town to a nearby "neighbors set." We always had the main body of our rolling stock, which was numerous, located in an area close to "Walnut Grove," the town. Knowing that the move, during the day, was a very short scene involving only a couple of cast members, I instructed the key grip, electric gaffer, props and wardrobe departments to load the amount of items needed for the short scene on a couple of pick-up trucks and leave all of the "big" equipment at base camp. Mike and I, with Buzz Boggs left for the location to get a "set up" for the scene.

A few minutes later, coming down the road that we were going to shoot toward was the grip truck, electric truck and the prop/wardrobe truck, all rolling toward us. I quickly stepped forward and asked through the bullhorn, "Do you people have a hearing problem? I told them to turn all of the trucks around and get them the hell out of the area!" There was a long pause, as department heads stared at me. Then, from directly behind me, I heard Landon's voice – loud and clear – say, "What are you waiting for? You heard THE MAN!" Instantly, the trucks were turned and left the area.

We would have lost a lot of time trying to move the bulk of the rolling stock out of our view each time we changed directions with the camera. We shot the scene and in a very short time, we were back in town, resuming our schedule. That was the last time my orders were disobeyed – even though I was not that popular with the crew.

In the next couple of years, things leveled out between the crew and I. I had always been strongly supported by both Mike and Kent McCray, and it was a matter of time until I began to feel more comfortable on the set.

One of the best things that ever happened to me was meeting and working with "Buzz" Boggs. He was one of the most incredible people that I have ever known – besides being one of the all-time giants of photography. He was a man of great enthusiasm and warmth. He worked as hard as any member of the crew, never sitting down as most cameramen like to do.



With Michael Landon and cinematographer Haskell Boggs, around 1978.

He was a tireless worker who could “make magic” when it came to pulling us out of a hole regarding running out of set time with one or more of the children. I would say, “Buzz, we’ve only got X amount of time left on ‘Halfpint’ or ‘Missy.’ I sure need your help.” No matter how little time I gave him, he always pulled me out of the hole. We worked together almost exclusively for many, many years and became very close, personal friends.

As I stated, Buzzy kept us out of a lot of problems by lighting a set quickly, but never sacrificing his incredible beautiful photography. Having three children working in each episode, we were always fighting for their time “on camera.” They could only be on the set for a total of eight hours a day (four hours in a school room that was on set, and four hours of camera).

Our main welfare worker (teacher) was Helen Minnear. She was the wife of the teacher with whom I had the problem a couple of years before. However, she was totally opposite from him. Helen was sweet and kind, as well as all business, but I would go to her on numerous occasions (during the many years we worked together) for a little extra time – five, seven, maybe eight minutes beyond the four-hour limit. She never turned me down, although she took time to think it over and said, “It can’t be a habit.” She was great and I thank her even to this day.

CHAPTER 41

As assistant director, I worked on the first episode of *Little House* and the very last episode. Around the seventh year, Mike asked me to direct some, and I thanked him, but said, “No thanks.” When I came to *Little House*, I had already produced and directed over 20 feature films – everything from Science Fiction to Westerns to who-done-it’s, etc. However, Mike was a one-man team when it came to his own show.



With Michael Landon, directing *Little House On The Prairie*, around 1980.

I watched for years as Bill Claxton would direct alternating episodes and, although Mike left him alone the majority of the time, I always sensed that Mike would see it in a different light – he held his tongue most of the time. I like Mike too much to risk that friendship by starting to direct, knowing that if he physically could, he would direct them all.

That’s what happened on *Highway To Heaven*. He directed 90% of the shows for five years. I’m sure that helped to weaken his health.

Anyway, the next year, I decided to direct. I did several shows, one of which was an episode entitled “The Faith Healer.” It was my second episode and I was in Hawaii, visiting, when Mike called and congratulated me on a good job. He had just seen the finished show. That put me more at ease and I went on to direct quite a few more after that.

When the series starring the Ingalls family left, Mike and Kent trusted me to direct the new two-hour opening of *Little House – A New Beginning*.

CHAPTER 42

Buzz's wife, Evelyn, was as sweet and down to earth as was Buzz. The very first day that I was in Kent McCray's office, around April 1974, I met Mike and Kent's secretary, Evelyn Maloof. She was extremely nice to me. I left thinking that Kent, Buzzy and Evie (as we called her) were people that I could be very comfortable with. As it turned out, comfortable was an understatement.

Not only did I have a terrific working relationship with Kent, but I became very close, personally, with Buzz, his wife Evelyn and Evie Maloof. Hank Tani, my trusted and true friend, became part of our little group and we spent many happy times together at my house or Buzzy's or Evie's apartment. Champaign was the order of the day and there was never a gathering that we didn't open a couple of bottles and toast our close friendship.

Evie, being Mike and Kent's secretary, would always go on location with the company – be it Arizona or Sonora in Northern California. Buzz, Evie and I would always have dinner together, no matter what the location was. We spent nearly 20 years being a close-knit group.

In the early to mid 1980's, we lost Buzzy's Evelyn. They had been married for over 50 years – they were high school sweethearts. Buzzy took it very hard. Their only daughter, Debbie, lived with her twin sons in Northern California and had to return to her home shortly after the service.

We had started shooting *Highway To Heaven* about the time Evelyn became ill and passed away. Buzz didn't want to return to work so for a couple of years, we worked without him. Finally, Kent, Mike and I thought it was time for Buzz to return. We all called Buzz asking him to return to work. Finally, he relented and we worked together for the next several years.

The "Four Musketeers," now only *three* – still had our gatherings and still had our champagne. We always toasted Evelyn.

CHAPTER 43

We started shooting *Highway To Heaven* around 1985 and after five years, Mike called it quits. He said he was tired of series shooting. I don't know why – he only had 15 years of *Bonanza*, nearly 10 years of *Little House* and five years of *Highway To Heaven* – and he was getting “tired of doing series?” I wonder why??

After we wrapped *Highway*, we went to Lawrence, Kansas, to shoot an NBC movie of the week *Where Pigeons Go To Die*. It starred Art Carney. We were there for a few weeks and on our return, Mike moved into his new residence. It was a multimillion-dollar estate that sat on about 10 acres, up a short canyon in Malibu. It was all anyone could possibly want.

We had been idle for about six months when Kent called and said that Mike was writing a new series for CBS. After nearly 30 years with NBC, he opted to go with CBS. They asked me to work the project, but having “retired,” at least in my mind, I thanked Kent and Mike and declined. Kent called back and said that Buzz was going to do the show, “So let's make it unanimous.” I said, “Fine. Let's do it.”

The year we finished *Highway*, Victor French called me to have dinner with him. We met and he told me that he had formed a production company to make movies and TV shows and that he wanted me to head the company for him. I was flattered, but told him that I really was retiring and that I really did appreciate his trust in me, but felt I had to say no. Vic told me that he was leaving in a few days for Europe to direct a feature film and he would be back in a few weeks.

He gave me a Western script to read and said to start giving a lot of thought as to budget, location, etc – that he would be back and ready to start getting into production. I said, “Vic, you're not listening, I'm not doing this.” He said, “Fine. I'll call you when I'm back and we can get started. By the way, I hope you like this script as much as I do.”

A couple of weeks later, Kent called and said that Vic was in a hospital in the valley with undisclosed problems. It seems Vic became ill while working on a film in England and they immediately flew him back to California. I was shocked, to say the least. A couple of days later, Kent called and stated that he and Mike had gone to see Vic in the hospital and Vic was diagnosed with cancer – throughout his body.

I said that I would see him right away, but Kent remarked that he was so bad, and looked so terrible, that he would not face him or Mike – rather turned toward the wall and would not respond. It nearly broke my heart. Victor was such an incredible guy to work with. He had a great sense of humor and was always coming up with great jokes.

He passed away a very short time later. Vic had no funeral service – rather, a wake at the Gene Autry Western Museum, in Griffith Park, near Glendale, California. There was a lively band and great BBQ as well as about 500 people celebrating his life – not death.

Vic was somewhat of a paradox in that, with his beard and shaggy hair, he looked like an old time cowboy heavy, but was in fact a very intelligent and modern-living guy. I was at his home in Studio City and was flabbergasted at his personal surroundings. The home was elaborately furnished with expensive “modern” pieces. The overall décor was very impressive, totally unlike Vic’s appearance.

I still miss him and sometimes, when watching reruns of *Little House* and *Highway*, I still get pangs of emotion, knowing that Vic and Mike are no longer with us. I generally fight back the tears.

CHAPTER 44

I recently attended a *Little House* reunion. The twin girls (Carrie), Rachael and Robin Greenbush, organized the event at Del Mar, CA, and among many others in attendance were Melissa Gilbert, Karen Grassle, Dean Butler and several of the kids who worked with us in the final days of the series.

David Friedman was there. I had directed him when he was around 10 or 12 years old in an episode entitled "The Last Summer." Our guest star was Vera Miles. Davis is a young man now and we reminisced about years past.

Ruth Foster, who was Karen's double and personal stand-in (as well as playing the running part of "Miss. Foster," our postmistress in Walnut Grove) was also there. After the series ended, Ruth, Buzzy Boggs, Hank Tani and I stayed close friends. I can recall times at Ruthie's house where she would have incredible dinners and always plenty of champagne!

CHAPTER 45

In 1991, we shot the two-hour pilot that Mike had written in and around L.A. It was entitled *Us*. We started shooting in November of 1991 and finished just before Christmas. Mike rushed the editing in order to get it to CBS as soon as possible – for he was thinking of being ready for the new season that generally would start around September of 1992. Kent called and said a screening of *Us* would be at MGM Studios for the cast and crew. That was around early February of '92.

We viewed the show and we all were very pleased with it. About a week later, Mike showed it to CBS and they said, “Go to series as soon as possible.”

Mike took his wife, Cindy and their two young children to Aspen so the kids could play in the snow, etc. Mike was to write the first few episodes of *Us*. He was to be gone for about three or four days. Less than two weeks later, Kent called and said Mike was back home and was suffering from what was thought to be ulcers. He went to the hospital for a complete examination. They found that he had cancer of the pancreas.

After a little while, he was re-examined and the cancer had spread into other parts of the body. He held a press conference and told his followers that he was going to “beat this thing.” But when I saw him, I knew he was in real trouble, for that “youthful look” had faded and he seemed tired and drawn.

I remember what he told me about Victor not wanting to see anyone in his final days, so I got my info through Kent. He kept me informed on a week-by-week basis. The doctors told him that he had about three months to live, but he refused to give in to the disease. He tried a lot of remedies that were available, including some that fans sent him through the mail.

Approximately three months later, he passed away. Kent called and told me of his passing. I knew it would be all over the news, so I went to the TV and sure enough, around 5 pm, I saw the gates of his estate open and a vehicle, carrying his body, come through the gate and continue down the canyon road toward the ocean. I thought, “There goes a ‘legend in his own time,’” and I thought how fortunate I was to have been a small, but integral part of his incredible career.

After nearly 35 years of being a “household name,” he reluctantly gave up his valiant fight for a few more years of fame. He truly was “one in a million,” or perhaps, with the “stars” around today, “one in 10 million.”

He was a prolific writer, director, star and he did it all with great style and grace. He is sorely missed. Not only by those who were close to him, but by the millions of fans who

kept him at the top of his profession – longer than any one I can think of, in the last 50 years.

There is life after Landon, but it will never be the same – for the nearly 20 years that I knew and worked with Michael had to be the best years of my life. I sincerely believe that's true for most of the men and women who made up our crew. The vast majority of them were there in the beginning, and to the very end.

Of all who worked with Mike, Kent McCray and his wife, Susan, were the closest to Mike. Kent went all the way back to the Bonanza days and was the last, along with Susan, to see Mike alive. Mike trusted Kent with every phase of production. Kent was originally Mike's production manager, but later became a producer. He knew the production end backwards and forwards, so it was a natural step to become a producer.

Susan McCray was our casting director for most of *Little House* and all of *Highway*, plus the several movies of the week, plus two pilots – one being *Father Murphy*. I said earlier that Fred Roos was near genius at casting in the Lippert days. But I have to say that Susan was genius!

Kent and Sue would throw incredible parties at their home in Malibu, followed by delicious meals at some of the top restaurants in Malibu. Most of the key member of the cast and crew were invited. So, there were 20 or 30 people attending on several occasions. Kent and Sue would “lease” a couple of train cars and they would be connected to the regular train that left L.A. and went down to San Diego.

Here again, most of the “key personnel” would meet at Grand Central Station in downtown Los Angeles around 3 pm on a Saturday afternoon. We would all entrain all the way to San Diego, about three hours, we would party. Sue and Kent arranged to have entertainment all the time we were in route - a combo that played great music, and a magician who entertained us all.

I remember on one such trip — along with Mike, Kent, Sue, Buzzy, Hank and yours truly — was David Rose (music composer and conductor) and his wife Betty. David was a wine connoisseur and he and Betty traveled all over Europe buying some of the finest wines in the world. Buzzy, Hank and I were sitting with David and Betty. We were drinking champagne, which I thought was very good. Buzz asked David what he thought of the champagne. David took a sip and said, “cheap.” We all laughed, but to me and the rest, it was darn god stuff.

Sue McCray, as I said earlier, was an absolute genius when it came to casting. She would come up with some of the best in Hollywood, as well as some of the “no-name” actors. I never stopped being amazed at her talent. She was also a wonderful person to work

with, as well as still being one of my favorite people. She's truly a very sweet gal. I still see and talk often with her and Kent.

Last summer, Sue invited Hank and I to a recording session with a full studio orchestra at Paramount Studio, to record all of her father's music – her father, being Harry Sukman, the great music composer and conductor for many motion pictures and television. It was an exciting event, hearing the music being recorded with a large studio orchestra.

We are just about all who are left of the tight-knit group that “worked and played” together for about 30 years. Buzzy Boggs passed away in 2003 at the age of 95. Evelyn “Evie” Maloof died in 2004, and Buzzy's daughter Debbi died, one year after her dad. So Ruth Foster, Hank Tani, Kent and Susan McCray and yours truly are still close and still enjoy each other's company – occasionally.

CHAPTER 46

My brother Jimmy had a daughter, Constance Jean – one of two of my surviving relatives. As far as I know anyway. My oldest brother, Foster, had a son named Foster Cravy Poindexter, but when the boy was around four or five years old, Foster, with wife Ruth and son, moved back to her hometown, Eldorado, Arkansas. Foster died a few years later, and that's the last I heard from them. So I don't know anything about my nephew.

Connie, on the other hand, is living in Fort Smith, Arkansas, my old hometown. She moved recently after living in Philadelphia with her husband Tony and young son Chris for probably 20 years. Connie was much like my own daughter. My brother Jimmy began drinking heavily the last years of his life and I don't think Connie had the father/daughter relationship that was needed. She is, as far as I know, my only living relation, and I love her dearly.

The other family that I hold very dear are the Alexander's, Steve and Tera, and their children, Robert, Teya, Meghan and Scott. I met them (sans Scott, for he was yet to be born) in 1989, when I moved across the street from them. Steve was a fire captain and his wife Tera was primarily a mother and wife – and a wonderful gal. We became friends instantly and spent many, many hours together.

Steve, as well as being a fireman, is also a master craftsman. He works with wood and other materials, like most people work with the TV remote. A couple of years after our initial meeting, Steve was promoted to Chief. We had Dom Perignon at my house and Hank, Tera and the newly-appointed Chief, dined together at a local restaurant.

A few weeks after meeting Steve and Tera, we met Tera's parents, Billie and Bob Borgman. I knew instantly where Tera's warmth and compassion came from. Bob was a retired fire captain, so he and his son-in-law had something in common.

As four years passed, we became closer and closer. In 1993, Scott was born. He became very ill a short time later and we all thought we would lose him. We prayed and kept a positive outlook, and miraculously, he lived and in a short time, became the picture of health – thank the good Lord! We were closer than ever. Every birthday, every occasion, we were together (including Billie and Bob) at the Alexander's. I have never felt more like “family” in my life during those times.

In 1992, Mike Landon died. I knew when that happened, I was really retired. After all the years with Mike, I had no desire to work with anyone else. Over the 40 years that I have known Hank Tani, I visited his family in Hawaii many, many times. His

family would visit me. In 1994, Hank decided to return to his roots and retire there. I've always loved Hawaii and I thought that it would be good for me too. So I, along with Hank, decided to move there permanently. I sold my home and left my dear, dear friends the Alexander's across the street.

I lived in Hilo, Hawaii, for eight years. The first year was terrific! Hank's family helped to replace the Alexander's. But like all good things, my happiness began to dwindle. (Surprisingly, so did Hank's.) I missed my friends, I missed the weather, the style of life that I had led for many years. I also missed the "family across the street." We kept in touch through the years, watched the kids grow through photos and knew that they were growing away from both Hank and me.

Hawaii is a paradise for a couple of weeks or so, however, once you take up residency, you realize that the nearly constant rain and humidity is overwhelming. Also, the locals don't look favorably upon "Haoles" (mainland white people who move there). They like the tourists, for obvious reasons, but don't stay too long. After nearly six years of trying to sell my house (I was trying to get my initial investment back), I sold it for a huge loss. I didn't really care – I had to get back to civilization.

A few days after November 11th, I, along with Hank, boarded a plane for L.A. I had called my friend and former real estate agent, Pearl Hession, and she had "lined up" some properties to show me. The next day, we were looking at models of homes that weren't yet built. I picked, with the expertise of Mr. Tani, a nice Spanish style home in Moorpark, CA—just a mile or so from my previous home, across from the Alexander's.

After returning to "God's Country," we instantly renewed our life with the Alexander's and the kids, now all grown, except for Scott, and Steve, now retired. It's like nothing had ever changed. We still spend all of our birthdays and every holiday together, including Billie and Bob—also, every Fourth Of July when Steve BBQs succulent, perfectly-grilled chicken (I think it's chicken, anyway). We are family again and how could anything be better?!

Life is good, thanks to a never-ending faith in the good Lord, and the strength that I have drawn from him, all through my life. That faith is as strong today as it was on that cold, miserable, frightening hill somewhere in Korea when I felt his strong hand on my weak being.

It was a long "Highway to Hollywood," from that little movie theater in Paris Arkansas, but it sure was worth the ride.



Maury Dexter, 2011 — age 84.

Dear friends I have lost:

Haskell “Buzzy” Boggs / Evelyn Boggs

Michael Landon

Victor French

Jack Leewood

Evelyn Maloof

Robert L. Lippert

Plato Skouras

Kent Taylor

Willard Parker

Russ Bender

Harold E. Knox

William Magginetti

Dan Simmons

And many more