

KISER MEMORIES

These are some of my memories of Aunt Verla Kiser's family, the accuracy of which are obviously clouded by my almost 72 years:

We moved to the house on Sharon Amity Rd owned by Mr Neal Craig around 1949 when I would have been around 3. BTW, Bill called me within the last year or so to tell me the house had burned to the ground, intentionally, if I remember correctly, by the fire dept as it had become uninhabitable. The Kiser family had been living in the house, for how long, I don't know. My understanding is that Uncle Wilkes, who I never met, or if I did, was too young to remember, took his life there shortly after the suicide period in a life insurance policy he'd taken out on himself expired, leaving Aunt Verla, Gene, Syd, Mickey, Mary Lou and Frankie. Aunt Verla, with the insurance proceeds, built a house several blocks away on Windermere Ln and when she moved her family into the new house we moved in to the Craig house.

We had been living in the Shannon house "down in the country", as we called that part of Meck Co after we moved from there, at the corner of Weddington and Simfield Church Rds, not far from the Caldwell homeplace where Grandma lived, the Shannon house belonging to Grandma's brother "Uncle Jim" (as Dad called him). I don't know when that house was built or if Grandma ever lived there, but it ended up in Uncle Jim's hands, I guess through inheritance. When he died, maybe before I was born as I don't remember him, he left the house and approximately 100 acre farm to his widow, who we called Aunt Minnie, for her lifetime and then, skipping his only child, Eunice, to 2 of her 4 sons, Jimmy Lee, and Shannon or "Shank". Jimmy Lee died during WWII leaving a widow and no children and they all assumed the property became Shank's outright, but actually Jimmy Lee's ½ interest went to his heirs, or maybe he had a will leaving all his assets to his widow-I don't recall-but I do know that when Shank was selling the farm in the late 70's or 80's, I helped him straighten out the title by having Jimmy Lee's widow sign a quitclaim deed, which she readily did. Well, I've digressed enough. When Shank and LaMarr got married and wanted to occupy his house, we moved to the Craig house on Sharon Amity after the Kisers moved into their new house on Windermere. If I remember correctly, Uncle Irb and Aunt Daisy lived in a room or two of the Shannon house with us and when we moved, I guess they moved in with Grandma.

I remember Aunt Verla (Dad usually called her Verla but when referring to her and her twin, he called them "Vern and Verl") as easy going with a good sense of humor and infectious laugh. I think she smoked, as did all of her sons (maybe not Syd). She worked at a cloth shop which we would frequent with Mom who was always needing material to sew our clothes. We visited the Kisers in their new home frequently. I remember lots of cigarette smoke and cigarettes in the ashtray. I think I remember Dad joining in smoking Cools. I vaguely remember picking up a lit cigarette lying in an ashtray and putting the lit end to my lips. You would think that would have prevented me from ever picking one up again but unfortunately it didn't.

We knew the route to the Kisers so well that one Christmas morning when I must have been 4 or 5, Bill hopped on his Christmas present, a second hand girl's bike Dad bought from Mr Craig, and took off

down Sharon Amity with me in full pursuit, blowing my policeman's whistle and waving my billy club, wearing my lawman's badge with my handcuffs dangling from my belt, all from Santa, trying to put Bill under arrest. He fled all the way to the Kisers with me running after him. When we got there, Bill turned around and pedaled home, leaving me at the Kisers, leg weary and out of breath. I remember all of the Kisers getting a kick out of it. Aunt Verla called Dad who came and got me in the car.

I don't know the ages of the Kiser cousins except that Frankie was 4 years older than Bill, who's 4 years older than me. Here's some of what I remember about each.

GENE: Cars, cigarettes, gold in his teeth and an infectious laugh. I guess you'd call him a hotrodder. Mom said every time we'd hear tires squeal we'd say "Gene Kiser". His first service station was on Commonwealth Ave. I think it was a Shell station. Dad and we boys hung around there quite a bit. I learned how to service a customer's car, putting in gas, checking the oil and water, cleaning the windshield. After Dad died, Gene told me the story of how he was able to start in business, which probably helps explain why we were frequently there. Shell wouldn't give Gene a lease on the station without a financially responsible guarantor signing it as well. Aunt Verla wouldn't sign because with 4 kids still at home she couldn't take the risk. Dad signed the lease. I don't know the details, whether Gene asked him to or whether he volunteered when he learned of his nephew's plight. Before he opened the station, Dad asked him whether he had any working capital, and Gene replied, "what's that?" Dad explained that he would have to have money to buy oil and other inventory and when Gene told him he didn't have any, Dad made him an operating loan of, I think, \$2500. So I guess our visits were, at least partially, as customers to help Gene's loan repayment ability as well as that of a lender checking on how his borrower's business was doing. Gene dug out from his archives the promissory note Dad had written up by hand on which was written "paid in full" with Dad's signature.

Gene then moved to an Esso station at the corner of Albemarle Rd and Independence Blvd. We stopped in there frequently as well, I'm sure to get gas and our car, or rather, cars serviced. While on Sharon Amity, we became a 2 car family when Dad bought Mom an old, maybe late 30's, Chevy 4-door sedan with running boards (Bill will have to correct inaccuracies) from Mom's Aunt Pat and Uncle Joe. I don't remember whether Gene's wife, Ginny worked in the office there or not, but she was definitely a fixture in the office in the Exxon station Gene later moved into at the corner of Sharon Amity and Monroe Rd. I was sure I was going to die in that station when a car would explode from the embers of a cigarette always dangling from Gene's lips as he peered into the open chambers of a carburetor on a car he was working on. If I've seen that scene once I've seen it a 100 or at least 10 or maybe 2-3 times, but it seems like it played out every time I was there.

Of course it was great to have a cousin with tools, trucks, etc. When Bill, with me as his unable assistant, started fooling with A-models, I'm sure we must have borrowed tools from Gene. I know one time he loaned us his pickup and tow chain to pull an old A-model sedan which Bill bought for parts from out in Derita, with Bill driving the pickup and me sitting on a wooden crate trying to keep the brakeless sedan in the road with a steering wheel which was at least a quarter turn loose. I was sure I was going to get killed or at least maimed, when, crossing Hwy 49 on Sugar Creek Rd, Bill slowed down in anticipation of our light turning red, thus letting the tow chain slacken as my letting out the A-model clutch with the

transmission in 2nd gear, my only means of slowing down, didn't slow me as quickly as the truck slowed, and then Bill, deciding the light wasn't going to catch us, taking off, with me still in 2nd gear, snatching the chain taut and feeling like the axle was being jerked out which would have left me in the intersection to be smashed by a tractor trailer. There, I go, digressing again. Sorry.

SYD (or is it Sid?): I remember that Sid also had an infectious laugh but I mainly remember his singing voice. I don't remember if Aunt Verla had a piano but I remember music in the house and Sid singing. He became very involved in barbershop quartet music and I remember going with him and maybe Bill and/or Harry to some of his groups' rehearsals. He always encouraged us to sing and loved singing with us. When I was a senior in high school, Harry, a sophomore, two friends and I sang as a barbershop quartet in the East Meck talent show (talk about uncool), singing "The Prettiest Girl, that ever I saw, was sipping cider through a straw" (which I first heard sung by the barbershop quartet which was part of the NC State glee club in which Bill sang) and "The Bullfrog on the Bank, and the Bullfrog in the Pool", two hot numbers in 1964 (ha-ha). Sid helped us decide on the songs, got us the sheet music and helped us rehearse.

I remember seeing Sid in his navy uniform and thinking that was cool.

MICKEY: I also remember Mickey's laugh, not infectious, but memorable. He drove my school bus at Oakhurst at least one year so it had to have been between my grades 1-5, probably closer to 1st since Frankie was riding the bus. Mickey and Frankie got into a heated argument on the bus about something. They were yelling pretty loud, maybe interspersed with a little profanity, as we young, impressionable ones watched with mouths agape. I think we were on McAlway Rd when Mickey made Frankie get off the bus and told him he could walk home. Gosh, would have been great to have had a cellphone and been able to have made a video of that!

Mickey and his first wife (Pat?) divorced. I don't remember if they had children. I remember his second wife, Becky, very well. Is she still living? I don't remember the details but I think it was Becky's niece from Winston Salem, or somewhere up that way, that she and Mickey, for some reason, took in to raise. It seems like the girl may have had some developmental difficulties. Mickey was very supportive of Becky's decision to take her in and if I'm not mistaken, they adopted her.

MARY LOU: Probably my first recollection of Mary Lou was her beautiful blonde hair, and if I remember correctly, she had a beautiful singing voice. I wondered how she survived among that crowd of boisterous boys. I remember that Dad sort of doted on her, perhaps trying to be a father substitute.

In Monroe we went to church with Fred and Babs Simpson who had gone to East with Mary Lou. Babs and Mary Lou were good friends, and, Babs, having grown up in Oakhurst, may have known Mary Lou since grade school days. Babs told me that she and Mary Lou wrote the words to either the East alma mater or fight song, and since I can't remember an East fight song (maybe that's why we Eagles didn't fare too well on the fields and in the gym), it must have been the alma mater..."As Eagles make their flight, across the blue and gold, Oh sons and daughters of East Hi may we be brave and bold..."

FRANKIE: I remember more about Frankie since we were closest in age and he was over at our house a good bit. Most of the boys in the neighborhood were between Frankie and Bill's age and our yard, with the sweet gum climbing tree and gully behind the house and the football field with the crumbling concrete sidewalk 50 yard line in the front, and the front porch were popular hang-outs, and they usually let me tag along. There was a dog, I think Joe Johnson's, asleep on the front porch and somebody had a golf ball which was being rolled around on the porch and it rolled in the dog's wide open mouth, and he swallowed it, or at least it got lodged in his throat. He was trying to cough it up when Frankie grabbed him by his hind legs and picked him up and shook the ball out. Frankie was immediately my hero.

Once, however, my image of him as well as the real him, literally, almost shattered. We, or probably they, with me watching, were playing football in the front yard and Frankie broke away for a touchdown run and turned his head back to taunt his pursuers and ran smack into a cedar tree which marked the goal line. His body just crumpled and I think we all thought he was dead, but being tough as a hickory knot, he got up, shook it off, and kept playing, which, in my mind, just added to his heroic qualities.

Dad traveled on business every other week and Frankie would sometimes come over and spend a nite or two. Once he and Bill toasted and ate an entire loaf of bread to my amazement and Mom's aggravation. The front door had a night latch which meant the knob could be turned from the inside but not the outside. I don't know if Frankie had a recurring problem with sleepwalking but one night he opened the front door and walked out onto the porch in his underwear, apparently in his sleep. The door closed and he had to beat on the door for Mom or maybe it was Harry, who slept in the front BR, to let him in.

Frankie liked excitement. Bill remembers riding with Frankie coming down Sharon Amity from Monroe Rd toward our house pretty fast at night and, as he approached the railroad tracks and cutting the lights (did he switch off the engine, too, Bill?) to see, and maybe hear if a train was coming without having to stop.

As I said, Frankie and Bill let me hang around them and their buddies. I've been told that as a kid I used to ask a lot of questions (still do-guess I haven't outgrown that propensity). There are two things that Frankie and Mickey used to say to me that bugged me to no end and that I can still hear:

In response to my wanting to do something: "You're too little in the britch".

In response to my questions about what they were doing: "Something for me to know and for you to ask questions."

I really hadn't thought much about it before now but those two quips from Mickey and Frankie probably have motivated me as much, if not more, than anything that's ever been said to me by anyone. I guess I set out to show them they were wrong.

Writing this has also made me think about the Kiser family differently than I've ever thought about them before. Dad and Mom never talked about Uncle Wilkes that I remember. I'm sure I was at least an older teenager before I knew he'd taken his life. We've just found out within the last few years, as we were

learning about our brother Joe, that Dad had been good friends with Uncle Wilkes that he was Dad's line of communication when Dad took off to Atlanta after marrying Joe's mother. I also didn't know that Uncle Wilkes had been a premed student at Davidson so I expect Dad admired and respected him. I guess Dad was as shocked and baffled by his suicide as his family was.

As I think about it, we probably spent more time during our growing up years with the Kiser cousins than we did any of our other cousins, Caldwell or Beaty. Maybe that was because of living near them or Dad's apparent feeling that he should spend time with them as something of a father figure. It's too late to tell Gene, Sid, Mick, Frank and now, even Mary Lou, but I'd like their offspring to know that I count my time with Aunt Verla and them as a blessing in my life.

I saw a great example of how to laugh and love, even when tragedy has befallen you; how to keep your head up, work hard and not complain or feel sorry for yourself, even though you probably have as much right to as anyone; how to treat younger ones by, if nothing else, letting them hang out with you.

I'll end with one last story. When Uncle Frank died, some of us cousins were pall bearers, including me (I think Bill was at State) and the Kiser boys, or at least a couple of them. I rode with the Kisers in the funeral procession from the Little Church on the Lane down Providence Rd to Sharon Memorial Park. WAYS was blaring on the radio and smoke was billowing out the windows. At the time, pious and proper me thought they were being somewhat disrespectful, but really, the Kiser boys were just being themselves, no charade of false propriety, no pretense of being other than who they were. Another good lesson I learned from the Kisers.

God bless you, Mary Lou

Cousin Tom

1/17/18

