

STEVENSON MEMORIES

ROBERT PRESTON ASH, JR.

August, 2004

Stevenson, Washington is in the heart of the beautiful Columbia Gorge, a deep cut through the Cascade mountain range. The Bridge of the Gods spans the Columbia River, and Cascade Locks is on the far side in Oregon. The Gorge has over a dozen major waterfalls, and many more during the spring thaw, a time of fresh, light green leaves and catkins hanging from trees, wild iris, poppies, lupine, and Queen Anne's lace. Summer brings hot, dry east winds funneled through the Gorge. Fall is beautiful with changing colors on the trees. Sailboarders flock to the area to catch the great breezes in spring, summer, and fall. To live in the Columbia Gorge is to be isolated by snow and black ice several times each winter, cut off from Portland to the west and Hood River to the east. However, when the roads are open, the waterfalls are made even more dramatic by their white spray frozen in lacy patterns on the sheer cliff faces — all the more visible because the trees are bare. Cold, icy east winds blow westward from the interior.

Stevenson was a small lumber town (Hegewald Lumber had the last big mill in town) built on a wide spot in the Gorge. It spilled down the hill to the river and is the Skamania County Seat. During the 1980's and 1990's it had a population of about 800. Traffic has to slow to 25 MPH through the 4-5 blocks of town. The main intersection was Highway 14 and Russell Street. The county courthouse covers most of the "zero" block on the East side of Russell, Nanee and Popsey's home was #17 (second from corner) on the West side, facing the courthouse. Popsey's store was mid "100" block on the courthouse side of Russell and across the highway. Nanee and Popsey (Gertrude Edna Ash and Elmer Preston Ash, Jr) raised their family in Stevenson. She was known as Gertrude and he as Pres to their friends.

When I visited as boy in the 1940's and '50's, I loved walking down to Popsey's store a block away from their home. Popsey had worked there for his father, and took over as owner upon his father's death. Popsey was a kind, gentle, generous man, and loved to talk about his family and the history of the gorge. He always made me feel welcome, and gave me attention.

The store was a two-story brick building with a covered wooden porch that covered the sidewalk. White wood pillars supported the porch and shaded the big glass windows and double doors that swung in. Upstairs were apartments that were never in use during my time. It was a general store with practical merchandise for working families. Inside were long wood counters with solid fronts running down each side of the store. Shelves behind them reached very high, and upper shelves had to be reached with the help of a ladder (I preferred to simply climb the shelves). He sold work clothes, overalls, tools, notions, groceries and fresh meat, bolts of fabric, zippers, ribbons, and thread in a wonderful spool case. I remember a saddle, too. People went

to Portland for fancy clothes, toys, and furniture. The store is now an antiques and collectibles store, rented from my uncle.

He had a big, handsome mechanical cash register, silver gilt with a marble shelf beneath the keys. Back in the office was a roll top desk and an old “model-one” adding machine with a vertical row of 10 keys for each number. You’d punch in a number and pull a long lever. The machine was about 12”x18”x12” high and sat on a rack that was at least 4’ tall. He took it home once a month for Nanee to do the billing. During the depression and war he let his neighbors run large tabs and never said anything if they couldn’t pay their bills. Nanee said later that he kept many families going during the depression. He never spoke of it.

The nursery

His roll top desk was full of cubby-holes and papers. Once, I was snooping through the desk and found a great wad of shredded paper (old bills?) in the upper right drawer. I removed some of it and found a little mother mouse and her mouse puppies. I went to tell Popsey. He said, “Did you put the paper back? OK. Then close the drawer and leave her alone.”

A treasure hunt

Once, when I arrived at the store on a visit, he told me that there was some change he’d dropped under the counter. If I wanted to, I could go under there and pick it up and keep it. There was a lot of change. I realized (much) later, that the floor was clean and looked freshly swept, undoubtedly so I wouldn’t get in trouble with my mother. The tradition continued on subsequent visits.

Where there’s smoke . . .

One day I was playing with Skookie Keller in the trenches under the floor at the back of the store. It was a cool hideout. We were camping, so we built a little campfire. Smoke seeped up through the floorboards and Popsey came to investigate. We had a most serious discussion with Popsey; and I got a hiding later from my mother. Popsey had warned me to stay away from Skookie and some other boys he called, “bad actors.” This reinforced the lesson. The Kellers ran an appliance store.

On the beach

Stevenson had a civic pool, but on one visit, Popsey took me swimming at the Stevenson Beach on the Columbia River. Then, it was sandy with beach grasses above the high water line and a gradual slope into the river. We stayed pretty close to shore, since Popsey warned us not to let the water get above our waists. After the swim, we built a small campfire, roasted hot dogs and marshmallows. We stayed well past dark. Sometimes I would go down there with my friends to collect cattails and soak them in kerosene to make “torches” — just like they had in the movies. I don’t remember that we ever lit them. Now the sand is gone, the gradient much sharper and the shore is ripped to accommodate the sternwheeler. Guess that’s progress.

Rock Crick (Creek)

Several times Popsey and I walked up Rock Creek, a couple blocks away. He loved the woods, trees and creek, but wasn't a fisherman (could not bear with recreational life-taking). There were a couple good pools up in the creek that we kids swam in. Other than the river, I don't remember Popsey getting in water any deeper than the tub at home. Over Rock Creek was the site of the Skamania County Fair. They had a penny toss that I soon learned was not a good way to make money. There were carnival games and rides and critter barns.

Vision quest

On at least two occasions, we crossed the river in the truck and drove up into the woods above Cascade Locks. We hiked above the tree line where he showed me stone squares, like the foundation of a small shed might be. He told me it was within these little stone walls that Indian boys stayed without food or water as part of becoming recognized as men in their tribes. If he knew the term "vision quest" he didn't use it. Since the Indians had given him the name "Tee Nus Blueback", I wonder if he had undergone the ritual. I never thought to ask.

Meal plans

Popsey went home for dinner each noon, then took a one-hour nap and returned to the store. I was pretty put out that I had to rest, too. It really **was** a dinner, too, in the farm-sense. We had a light meal in the evening. This regime took some getting used to for a city kid. He loved to take the whole family for a "big feed" once each visit. We'd go to The Charburger in Cascade Locks across The Bridge of the Gods or up to Hood River.

#17 Russell Street

Popsey and Nanee lived in a light gray shingled house at #17 Russell Street. It was half a block up from the highway on the west side of the street. A covered porch with a tongue and groove deck ran the full length of the front with three steps down to the walk. It had two stories with three dormered bedrooms and a bath upstairs, and a full basement for storage. The main floor had a good-sized living room, dining room, kitchen and bedroom — all with high ceilings. The door and window frames were lovely, dark mahogany. Nanee kept them and the hardwood floors polished and gleaming. Once a year she stripped the linoleum kitchen floor and re-varnished it — she was proud of its high polish. Outside was a detached garage.

Nanee was a dear, gracious lady. Her nickname for me was "Bobbity". She did her housework in the morning, prepared a large dinner at noon, rested, and had her afternoons for social activities, bridge, shopping, etc. She dressed nicely whenever she left the house. Her hair was in two long braids in big coils on each side of her head. She brushed it 100 times morning and night and applied Merle Norman face cream morning and night. I don't think I ever accompanied her on her afternoons, since I had to "help" Popsey.

Nanee loved her garden. It had a bed of about a dozen rose bushes, mostly "Peace". She had lilacs beside the back door, many iris between the grass and the

driveway (planted by her son, Bob), hydrangeas, a big pink cherry tree at the end of the front porch, and a huge forsythia bush in back. Everyone driving into town from the West admired the forsythia. It was like a great yellow blaze when seen from the highway. She loved to cut and “force” some forsythia to bloom inside early every spring. She also loved to float a 15” glass bowl of solid Peace rose blooms.

Toll road

My first commercial enterprise took place on the sidewalk in front of their house. I must have been about six years old. I found an oar beside the house, leaned one end on the three-foot tall cement gate post, and the other on the fender of Popsey’s La Salle sedan. This created a tollgate like the one I’d seen on the Bridge of the Gods. I charged people 2 cents apiece to pass on the sidewalk. One of my “customers” was the judge. Most paid willingly, but someone called Popsey at the store. He was most hard put to keep a straight face as he explained to me why I couldn’t set up a toll-booth on the public sidewalk.

Sleeping arrangements

Nanee slept downstairs in a double bed and Popsey, a bodacious snorer, slept upstairs in his double bed with a pistol (.32 Colt Pocket Model) under his pillow. He apparently took somebody’s threat on his life seriously. He also had a .30-’30 in the closet and a .32 wheel gun in Lowell’s old room. Lowell’s room was next to his and about the same size. Dad’s room was smaller, but that’s the one I got! Sometimes he’d come in and tell me stories. My favorites were “Androcles and the Lion” and “All Baba and the Forty Thieves”

On Sundays he brought Nanee her coffee, crawled into her bed and they read the paper and talked.

The neighbors

The house above them on the corner had a huge tree, and an “approved” playmate for swimming, hiking, etc.

Next door to the south was the Stevenson Library, then The Skamania County Pioneer newspaper office (The pressroom was my favorite place and I visited it at least once every trip), the theatre, and a tavern on the corner. Then you crossed Hwy 14, and Popsey’s store was in the next block on the east side of the street. The US Post Office is now adjacent on a lot Popsey sold them. It was a pretty good deal for him because it increased foot traffic past the store and was closer for him to get his mail than the old one had been. Across the street was a rooming house. On the SW corner of the next intersection on Russell was the old Stevenson Bank owned by John Attwell. Popsey’s father, E. P. Ash, once saved the bank from bankruptcy with \$30,000 and became an honorary President of the Bank.

At the end of that block with the bank are the tracks of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF). Beyond them and down the slope is the Stevenson Landing on the river. The Stern-wheeler docks there. A complex of vacation rentals (very nice), sits just to the West, now catering to the wind-surfers. The river had and has a fair amount of barges carrying grains from the dry land wheat farms in the east to Portland and the

Pacific Ocean.

The cemetery

The Stevenson Cemetery is half a mile east of town on the Highway 14. It was developed either by the Oddfellow’s Lodge or the Fellowship of Eagles, and sits between the railroad tracks and the river on a hill with a beautiful view of the Columbia. The Ash Family Plot is surrounded by a three-foot, white cinder block wall enclosing an area about 15 or 20 feet square. I was about 8 or 9 when Popsey first took me to visit it. We looked at all the graves and he told me about his father. His father settled and worked first in Cascade Locks. Popsey took me across the river to see where his house used to stand.

Family graves in the Ash Family Plot in 2004:

- * E.P.Ash 1863-1921 (Sr. - Popsey’s father)
- * Father (??)
- * E. Preston Ash 1890-1970 A Friend to Man (Jr. - Popsey)
- * Gertrude E. Ash May 20, 1894 - Mar. 21, 1990 A Gracious Lady Always (Nanee)
- * Emily M. Young Oct. 4, 1937 (Popsey’s niece, died in infancy)
- * Our Baby - Michael Preston Ash
Mar. 10, 1950 - Mar. 13
Son of Lowell & Dolores Ash
- * Dolores Ash “Dee” 1926-1998
Courageous, loving wife and
mother (Lowell’s first wife)