

# **ME AND ANGIE**

A short story  
by  
**PETER HEMP**

## PREFACE

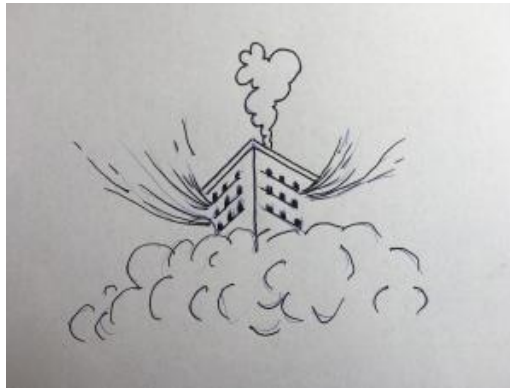
One of the biggest rewards to being a plumber is the enjoyment of your long faithful clients. It so happens that Pete the Plumber has a client recently retired from a very successful screenwriting career: an Academy Award and numerous box office bonanzas. It is this client who asked me to put to paper (so he could “play” with it) a ‘funny’ true-life story I had told him over a snifter of brandy after finishing up a repair in his home. (That was a *long* time ago.) But, with book writing and four young children there never was found the time for this chore, until many years later, with an empty nest. When yours truly eventually *did* do the deed, my friend had retired from writing.

**Me And Angie** is that story, a slice of memoir. Does it have anything to do with plumbing? Well, yes, in a roundabout way. In **Plumbing A House** on page P-23, the author made reference to this “story.” Why? Because in spite of the humor therein, he wanted to make an impression on you, the reader. He wanted to impress upon you the importance of considering spending some of those hard earned project dollars on a rather unglamorous aspect of your remodel/new house endeavor. **Me And Angie** is an accounting of the author’s experiences as a municipal fireman, his first year “out of the nest.” From these experiences he learned just how important a **garden hose** can be/has been, in protecting life and property from fire. Any doubts? Just Google that topic. For a garden hose, in these situations, to have any chance of saving your bacon, needs the best possible supply of water you can give it. Where I introduced this topic in the text, I was exhorting you to install a 1-in. under-house, hose bib perimeter supply with a sufficient hydrant (note brand recommendations) spacing to give you a fighting chance. This advice also included the purchase of RUBBER, 1-in contractor’s hoses (two 50-footers). Why rubber and why 1-in.? Because I learned as a municipal fireman that the difference between tragedy and success (aside the difference between ½-in. and 1-in. diameter supply piping) means also that the *best hose* is PARAMOUNT. The best hose for the job is a 1-in. layered, cord-reinforced, RUBBER contractor’s hose. Because these are much heavier than the cheap run-of-the-mill vinyl varieties. I will *here* also suggest that you purchase a Series C or Series D hose reel, viewable at [coxreels.com](http://coxreels.com) to host and facilitate the ease of use, these defenders of your life’s investment.

Was/is there any reason to reference **Me And Angie** when just the above paragraph displays my prejudices? Well, the author has learned that in the classroom it is best to now and then lighten-up on his students with the tech-speak and intersperse a little levity. Now, I did hope to posthumously bring some smiles and maybe even a few laughs to downstream descendants by relating this tale that, at times, was hilariously bizarre. I won’t spoil it by any further discussion, but whether you choose to read it or not, you now know why I’m preaching one inch rubber on one inch supply.

## GRANDPA PETE'S MEMOIRS

*Me And Angie* is a slice of memoir in story form. When yours truly created it, he had only his descendants in mind. In this public share PDF version, the author has altered it ever so slightly because it was my original assumption that when it was eventually read, every person mentioned (including the author), would be conveniently/fittingly dead. The San Joaquin Valley town which hosts the focus of this story, to spare it undue embarrassment, has been given a fictitious name. Being that some dark humor, at times, was at someone else's expense, respective surnames have been deleted, but those mentioned with full names the author trusts, if still living, would have no objections.



### ME AND ANGIE

In the spring of 1962 Grandpa Pete was of the locust swarm loosed upon the world by St. Mary's High School (all boys) in Peralta Park, Albany/Berkeley, CA. I remember at the graduation ceremony the class sang selections from the musical, West Side Story. And we took ourselves so seriously. That summer, immediately out of St. Mary's, I was already a one-summer veteran of construction labor: manual excavations/demolitions. Very taxing activities. As fore-mentioned (Me And Bill), was the fact that I rarely missed a meal, especially during these months. But I burned it off as quickly as I wolfed it down and I was glad to have a job again that summer of my senior year. In addition, I sensed that it was going to be more enjoyable this time around because the same adult crew had already 'put me through the mill' the summer before, and we had fun, good relationships in place.

After getting toughened-up for a couple of weeks by demolishing and removing a row of old, stucco'd garages out in Orinda, on a former community pool property, I was handed a round point shovel. The company

was building one of Wally's big mansions. It was in a hilly, oak and boulder strewn neighborhood. This was long, long before now commonplace excavation marvels such as 'Bobcats' and small, powered-hoes (which can get into tight quarters). Instead, the three Bubba's (Tommy, Frank and Leon), and a green Yankee (Grandpa Pete), were hard at work backfilling perimeter foundations and retaining walls. All three of my laboring co-workers were in their late twenties and journeymen whiskey runners who had also run short of luck. For them it was stay out of the Carolinas and Georgia or do long time jail. Tommy and Frank were still driving their 'tankers': 1958 Oldsmobile 2-dr. hard-tops. Tommy's was pink and white and Frank's was Forest Green. They swore their model and make of car was the best ever manufactured for conversion to a tanker. Leon and Frank at the time were bachelors and Tommy had just fallen off the wagon and was hooked up to Lucile, a high school-aged girl. Leon and Frank shared an apartment on Solano Avenue just below San Pablo. Tommy and Lucile were shackled-up in a kitschy mother-in-law unit on the north slope of Albany Hill. Why the Bubba's ended up in Albany, California, so far from Dixie, I know not. I think maybe Tommy had an aunt or an uncle out here.

Tommy was the mouth piece. He was Mr. Personality. I could envision him in a white suit and preaching any number of the scams on religious TV stations. He was almost pink himself with light blue eyes and a lotta freckles, and he had rusty-red, short, curly hair. It had already started to thin on his crown. He wasn't too tall, maybe five-foot eight or nine but he was thick and well-muscled. He was alpha. This was decades before the gold chain fad first emerged on the scene, but Tommy would have been a natural. I'll bet he could've sold used cars and diamonds both.

Now Frank had a flat-top of thick, white-blonde hair that reminded me of a long in use Hemp family scrub brush. And come to think of it his skin was just about the same hue as the palmed, weathered oak of the handle. Frank was the first person that I can remember having eyes of a different color. Otherwise he was an average looking guy (5' 10" or so, 170 lbs.), until you shook his hand. Mine disappeared in his. He could hold a basketball in a top-grip. Frank was the mathematician in the group. That's not to say he wasn't a worker. Oh hell no. He could move a lot of dirt, brick, timber or stone. Good for us, he was also an expert in arithmetic and geometry and it was Frank and the boss who laid out the batten boards and string lines. Frank also had an uncanny ability to dig a near perfectly plumb, straight, level footer (ditch). Until that summer work Grandpa Pete had never given it a thought as to how difficult it was to dig the perfect trench.

Now Leon was almost my height and of similar build. He had gray-green eyes, a light olive complexion and fine, jet-black hair that he combed often and straight back. He sort of reminded me of a beefier version of actor, Sir Basil Rathbone. He was often whistling, and when he wasn't, spoke very little. Invariably and always with mischievousness Tommy and Frank would start 'needling' Leon with any fabricated malarky and keep it

up until Leon would (i.e.), "go-off," breaking into a scathing, melodramatic taunt. In French. (He had a pleasing timbre when riled.) What I found very funny, he'd (Leon), be addressing me all the while looking back and forth at his laughing adversaries, trying to elicit *my* sympathies for his cause. Tommy and Frank, then, would be slumped shoulders, heads back, mouths wide open, loud laughter.

Our crew had only a half-hour for lunch. Must sound feudal to you, no? In those days Grandpa Pete might have had a dozen donuts and a half-gallon of milk for lunch, then laid down in the shade on a plank to take the longest nap possible before having to go back to work. During our breaks these Southern Bubba's always listened to a news program that absolutely drove me nuts! "Paul Harvey, here." Boring! Boring! Boring! After several weeks back on the job I had difficulty opening my hands from the "memorized" grip employed for big-muscle actuated tools like shovels, picks, mattocks, mauls, and sledges. Grandpa Pete worked for the Wallace R. Burr Construction Company, of Berkeley. Wally, my boss, was a really neat fellow. He and his wife, Tina (who made the most fabulous spinach rolls of all time for my wedding), and their three children lived at 961 Regal Road. Wally was a graduate of CAL Berkeley's Architecture School and a general contractor who built his own creations. (I wouldn't recommend that to anyone.) For me at the time it was a wonderful job. The Hemp house at 1090 Mariposa and the Burr home at 961 Regal Road were close enough that for the first summer I'd walk to the Burrs' right after an early breakfast and ride to the job with Wally, invariably in Orinda/La Fyette/Moraga/Montclair. He had a VW pick up/flatbed truck (perennially overloaded), and I can still hear the laboring anguish of the engine and transmission as we slowly cranked over Fish Ranch Road or Wild Cat Canyon Road or Spruce or 'Steep Marin' or Mountain Boulevard each morning and evening. It was a good arrangement for me but I know I taxed his ability to get all the tech issues for the day resolved because regardless of where he was by quitt'n time he had to back track just to pluck me. But I am so very grateful for his patience. His deployment *of* me generated *in* me a resilience by my trying to mimic his. Wally nurtured a phenomenal work ethic. The experiences served me well for the rest of my life. As a big young man right out of high school Grandpa Pete could read prints and satisfy several construction protocols.

Thankfully, early on in that second summer two things happened that made my life easier. I got a car of my own so I didn't have to wait around on my boss, and I was sprung from the Bubba's Chain Gang.

One day "Tiny the Plumber's" helper didn't show for work. Tiny worked for Suenderman Plumbing who for many, many years had a yard and shop and retail store at University and Seventh Streets in Berkeley. It was a third generation union shop and they did most all of Wally's jobs. Leon and I, pulled off dirt detail, were feeding carpenters two-by-twelve rafters which they were setting. We were humping. Sweat was pouring. It was a couple of hours to lunch and the temp was already mid-nineties. I heard Tommy calling me, coming up from behind: "Pedro! Pedro! Get your butt down to the shack. Wally wants you!" The shack was just that, a

rectangular shed. It was a combination job/office and tool shed. Wally designed it to be assembled and disassembled using screws and bolts, and it incorporated metal channels and corners and standard sheets of plywood. It sat on and was leveled by foundation jacks. The temporary phone/power pole could be bolted to either end. He had a nice, full spectrum draftsman's lamp above his planning table right behind a window; and, on each job the shack was positioned with natural light qualities in mind.

"Pedro I need you to help Tiny today. His helper didn't show. Where are your gloves? Tiny is down in the garage; let's go down there together." Another of Wally's great house projects, in its second year, on a multi-acre property; it was exquisite elegance. There was a cavernous garage below the first level, all excavated from hillside. It was still, at the time, a dark world down there. A few illuminated bulbs were positioned for some tasks at hand, one, way up and far back in the 'cave'. These were the years when the American public was in full swing building bomb shelters to protect ourselves from the imminent Soviet attack and these clients were very wealthy and could cut a check for their wants. Hundreds of yards of concrete had gone into the forms. The high ceiling garage/shelter was now host to a maze of scaffolding. Way up on top a man was moving around. Wally, with a cupped-palms-megaphone, yelled up to him: "Tiny. I've brought you a prisoner." "Ayee! Thanks Wallace. I'm coming down."

Tiny made a lot of racket getting down. Before he got just paces away I saw why. Oh my gosh! You guessed it. Boy! I remember wondering if his mom lived through her ordeal. In time I grew to love Tiny. Grandpa Pete thinks there was a Pete the Plumber (yours truly), because a Tiny the Plumber came first. It didn't take long (that morning), before a big grin grew on my face. "Man! This is fun playing with all the neat looking junk." It proved just that. Like lickety-split my enthusiasm for going to work exploded. Tiny turned out to be a great teacher. For the rest of that first day I was unloading truckloads of assorted iron fittings, lots of heavy melt-lead ingots, oakum, various lengths and diameters of iron pipe, *lots* of weird tools, and arranging it on the ground and in numerous rooms according to a design in Tiny's head. I could now see why maybe his regular helper might have chosen not to show up that day. But I remember thinking: "Even if I have to go back to the Bubbas' tomorrow, a day away from them and working with Tiny has been a lot of fun." The next day I was still plumber's helper. And the day after that and the day after that. Like pearls on a string the days lined into weeks and months. Fantastic. There were some painful reminders for inattentiveness which almost always involved molten lead, like down the back, inside the shirt, on wrists and into boots. But, luckily those were relatively few and having a puzzle to build kept my interest. This work was far from the drudgery of endless repetition like digging and framing. Another perk which I noticed right away was the added respect. Other trades showing up 'told' me just where I stood with the Bubba's. From the tradesmen it was: "Mr. Plumber, where can I find Mr. So and So....?" The Bubba's: "Hey Yankee, get your ass over here, yesterday."

Somehow I also felt that my Waukau, Wisconsin grandpa, Homer Hemp, would have approved of my endeavors. Homer was a plumber/H2o inventor in his own right. Like another Wisconsinite, John Muir, Homer had spent many 'deep snows' tinkering (in Homer's case, with various pumps and odd apparatus) in the cellar. As the job and summer progressed my relationship with the Bubba's didn't stay the same though. Somehow I must have given them the impression that I was now really enjoying my labors much more than when I worked with *them*. Eventually the Bubba's were determined to "flog the deserter." Well, Tommy and Frank anyway. Grandpa Pete had escaped their overbearing ways though it was still a friendly rivalry. I now had louder thunder than they had, and I was a damn Yankee! When encountering either Tommy or Frank somewhere on the job site I would sometimes put on an act of Leon's irate French Cabby. It was hilarious fun. Sometimes Leon and I would join forces and just be outrageously taunting. Fridays, after quitting time, the Bubba's and Yank always had a few beers on the tailgate before heading home over the western hills. That summer passed very quickly and soon I would be heading off to college for my first year. On my last work day we knocked off after lunch and headed to a beautiful little park (one of many on the northwest slopes of the Berkeley Hills). They wanted to 'do some steaks' and a fond farewell in my honor. That they did in fine form. But they also got their revenge. It was called *white lightning*, or corn-squeezin's. I can remember drinking only a rather small amount of the stuff. It was a ten minute drive from that hillside park to my house on Mariposa, at Amador. I didn't remember making that drive. I was way late getting home from work and that night my car was found parked three feet from the curb. My parents were furious. We were leaving early in the morning for a family trip/vacation to Disneyland. On the way we were going to stop in Citralia and meet my new football coach and the 'brass' in the town's Fire Department. Grandpa Pete was going to be bunking and boarding there at CFD, training in the fireman's arts, and so earning my keep when not on campus. (Older brother Mick was out of the house by two years already, up at Gonzaga U. in Washington.) That next morning, in the chrome rhino, it was all silence as we headed south.

#### Anaheim Bound

Stopping off in Citralia was an eye opener. Did *your* father ever have a favorite saying? My father, Kenneth, had one: "You boys have got a rude awakening coming." My older brother Mick, me, and my younger brother Jonathan were the intended. ("Two-Gun Peaches" [brother Tim] was still wrestling Teddy Bears.) (Me And Everett). I had heard it for years though. A later *response* might have gone something like this: "Yes Dad. I know. It's coming. Ohhh, Dad, say, you wouldn't be needing the Impala tonight would you?" "Oh thanks Dad!

Just one more thing. You wouldn't also maybe have a twenty, at ten-percent--seven days would you?" "Oh! Thanks Dad!"

On the way down to Citralia , Dad must have been thinking something like: "Yeah, militaristic conditions and public transportation; maybe he'll even learn something." He sure was smiling when he stopped our car in front of the firehouse.

The first thing I 'see' when I think of Citralia is: glossy painted (light green), concrete floors. There at CFD (Church Street & Main), at first glance there seemed to be acres of it. All the truck bays, kitchen, staff room, and walkways and passage ways on the first floor were the same color. It was kept spotless too. The very next vision that comes to mind is Ed Lickiss's (my high school rowing coach), smiling face. Ed was a successful Bay Area electrical contractor whose motto (painted on the sides of his trucks), was: "We Do Shocking Work." Ed, while at CAL Berkeley, pulled oars under renown rowing coach Ky Ebright, on the CAL Crew. In later years Ed founded the Lake Merritt Rowing Club where, as a Charter Member, he coached me. Grandpa Pete was in Citralia, foremost, because Ed thought it would be a good place for me to get a start. He had an 'old flame' who was in the college administration and who would watch over me. Did she ever. And, the college had this special relationship with the fire department which provided them with athletic specimens to augment the ranks of their regulars. It was a win/win for both camps and a controlled laboratory for my 'rude awakening'. What a ride it proved to be! It far superseded rude in some aspects. And it far exceeded my wildest dreams as a then man of/on my own. My parents could not possibly have foreseen such events as what eventually unfolded.

That first and only family visit (with such successful and staunchly conservative parents on view), cemented me into the firefighter's fold. We were given the grand tour and introduced to the Chief and Assistant Chief and duty officers. Upon saying our good-byes I was instructed to report back in several weeks' time, prepared to stay the scholastic year. Then we took a drive to go see the college and meet the coach. Unlike the fire department's main station, a lofty, classic Spanish adobe with bell tower, I was disappointed with what I found at the college. It reminded me of a 1950's bland, flat, public junior high school done on the cheap. Very boring.

Disneyland however (continuing south), proved a real hoot. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I could remember sitting on my but as a young boy amongst my siblings watching the weekly Walt Disney Program on a small black and white T.V. Then, it was televising earth movers *building* Disneyland. For us San Francisco Bay boys that was another world. As time went on many of our social circle would rave about their vacations to Disneyland. Grandpa Pete felt that he would be the last person on earth to get there. But I must say my parents sure made up for it on that first trip. We stayed in regal accommodations and while on the upholstered lounges



under the cabana by the pool, sipping punch, the feeling of arriving long overdue slowly retreated with the golds of the sunsets and the splashing sounds of the bikinis hitting the water.

Boy, was Grandpa Pete full of himself then. On a vacation a couple of summers prior when Mick graduated from St. Mary's, my parents had driven all of their (at the time) children around thirty-three of the States. On that trip Grandpa Pete had lucked-out meeting an 'absolute angel' in a same motel my family stayed at. Would it, could it repeat itself? At those hormone levels Grandpa Pete was thereafter always checking the radar.

## Holding My Breath

The following few weeks back in Berkeley were some real 'hyper' ones. I remembered how I had vicariously enjoyed big brother Mick's escape from the castle. Now. Finally. It was *my* turn! "I wuz ready." The pressure had almost built back up to those 'capacitance' levels of adolescence, waiting for our summer trips to Grandpa Homer's farm (Me And Everett). I was bust'n out. I wuz almost free. But not without a dose of melancholy. I had to leave my hot rod home! "Oh Maaaaaaaannnnnnn!" How was I to be 'Kookie' Byrnes? (from the then popular TV series 'The Sunset Strip'). There was no arguing with my father. Matter of fact, you chose your battles with him because you could be the target of blows if you pushed your case too far, or fast, or both. My car *would* be parked in the garage, and with contracts in blood, my little brother Jon was 'ever-never' to get *his* hands on *my* wheels. Grandpa Pete, now, after reading Tollè would have said: "Sure Jon, use it and take care of it." And, Jon was a good mechanic.

Dad also took me shopping and I got some new duds. (That just reminded me.) The poor man (you), who has three young adult sons, and *you* also happen to be *their* shoe and suit size. Another reason for Dad to look with joy on Peter's departure: He once got out a pair of what he was expecting to be brand new Floreschier Wing Tips, in black, from the back of his closet where he'd put them moons past because he still had perfectly functional ones. Being an elegant business man he had them in traditional hues: cordovan, black and brown, some tasseled. Well, Grandpa Pete once needed a good pair of shoes for a date, so he went to his dad's closet and borrowed a pair "way back there," telling himself he'd do it only this once. Oh, Grandpa Pete maybe did it a few more times but what I didn't know then was that my brother Jon was also 'borrowing' the same pair of shoes for *his* social activities. They always did look so shiny. I'd polish the hell out of them every now and then, and Jon was doing the same. Well, you can see it coming can't you? One day Dad needed a fresh pair of black, and he got out those he'd placed way 'outta' the way. Boy, I wish I had pictures..... Nahhh.... no I don't. "Oh mannn." Poor fella. Right out of the box he first must have thought: "These can't be the ones....

These have worn soles and heels....” How quickly the ‘revelation’ came into focus is anybody’s guess. It was the same for a pair of slacks, sox, and sports coat. Oh Dad. It's too late now but I'm *so* sorry I caused you all that angst.

## Humble Pie

My luggage was hand-me-down. But I liked it. Must be the upper mid-West connection. As I remember the pattern it was a ‘kinda’ Hudson Bay Blanket motif. Ochre, yellow and green bands on one end of a manila field. The handles were a handsome translucent amber with polished brass accents and the latches, hinges, and the mating edges....shiny brass. I had one large case and two smaller ones. Grandpa Pete was resigned to hauling them and via Greyhound Bus. But "Awh Jeez," with my prized luggage on the rear fold down rack of my restored Elliot Ness cruiser, rolling on down Highway 101 *would have* been soooo fine.

If there had been a convenient rail method of depositing me and my schtuff in Citralia, I'd 'a been much happier. Nope. No choice. Greyhound. The day of departure was a Saturday. Mid-morning as I recall. Inside the depot it was a microcosm of the absurd, with more than enough weirdos. The company man who "introduced" the arrivals and departures over the PA system probably had worked with the original Barnum and/or Bailey. What a whack-o. He was announcing bus arrivals and departures of all things as if they were foreign heads of state going and coming. There was also something like a very unpleasant miasma which permeated the whole place. A sick-spirit feeling. I could "see" that the building at one time had been proud of itself. But it had the unmistakable "ring around the collar" about it now. I don't remember who was there to see me off. Certainly Dad. My mother probably, but with three other kids still in the house and as busy as she could often find herself, maybe not. I do remember that bus ride though. Starting from there for Citralia was an education in itself, my introduction to 'rude awakening'.

Immediately entering the rotunda of the terminal Grandpa Pete felt a jolt of adrenalin administered without any sense of why. Something was up. And that would have been in spite of any family members who might have been along. It didn't take more than a few minutes to locate the two sources of bad vibes; they were some strange species. This was way before the halución-libré movements of the following decade. No Timothy Leary on the scene, yet. And magic-mushrooms and peyote were still primarily in aboriginal circles. These dudes were loo-loo's. (Could have been the good model airplane glue. This pre-dated legislative controls and formula changes.) I remember hoping that they'd be getting on other buses. But wouldn't you know it. They got on my mine. I was one of the very last to board. I was not a happy camper at this moment wondering where the weirdos would be sitting. What was it? I don't know. When I boarded ticket in hand, prepared to make a sharp

left and take another step up, I could see maybe a half dozen empty seats down one aisle, when the driver held out his arm to stop me and then pointed to a seat right behind him as he removed a jacket from the cushion. He'd been close enough, somewhere, before we all boarded to know that there were some troubling vibes in the herd. I happily sat down and we pulled out of Oakland heading south.

As I write this five decades later I read in my daily inter-net newspapers about the foundering dream of California's voter approved high speed rail system. When my great, great grands are teenagers, will there still be private cars burning gasoline? Will it be all electrics or some other yet undiscovered technology? How expensive will any methodology be by then? Is it a good possibility that a large proportion of society will no longer be able to *afford* to operate private vehicles? Perhaps sleek new hydrogen or electric buses or even Critical Cold Flywheel public transit will be the norm. Maybe Oakland could even someday again have a new, proud, state-of-the-art transit terminal, a twenty-second century version of San Francisco's original 3<sup>rd</sup> Street Station.

What was going through my mind at this time? I was finally *off* and life had become a new adventure! I was hopeful the odds were not two creeps going all the way to Citralia. This was a 'milk run' and we'd be pulling into and out of many pot holed driveways, and I'd be making a transfer. Maybe these guys would be long gone on the way. It seemed like forever by the time we left San Leandro behind and then another eternity making the last roadside stop on the south side of Hayward. Brewer, in his "Up And Down California," speaks of *Hayward's* as it was still a private ranch. South of Hayward we finally got into some truck garden and orchard country and the clinging, weird vibes of Greyhound Oakland were slowly sloughing off. The Oakland terminal back then still had a functioning restaurant and on this trip we pulled into a small stop that had a soup and sandwich counter still manned by ladies in white. Grandpa Pete has always had respect and appreciation for folk who toil in the food industry, serving the masses. A vision that has been living in my memories for some past years, looked me in the eyes from a poster. It was a picture of an institutional kitchen toiler staring at you over a stainless steel counter. She was standing behind and between huge steaming pots, with other pots and pans and paraphernalia hanging on racks all 'round' her, and her stern gaze was saying: "Tell me what I do all day is not true labor and worthy of your respect." If the lady in the poster were suddenly to come to life, I'd wanna give her a big hug and say: "Mamma, I love you! What's cook'n babe? How's all the family? Can you cook me a raccoon for Friday? Whata ya want *me* to bring to supper?"

At one point we pulled off the highway and within the distance of a city block parked in a baking hot little armpit of a space, Goshen Junction. The sparkling ground was paved in tiny shards of broken glass and gum wrappers, with cigarette butts that had accrued over decades. They formed drifts around the sides of the three pay phone booths. A small, greasy food shack stood alone near a bed room sized hut that was the bus

terminal. No shade. Stand around outside and perspire. I was filled with glee! The bus pulled away and the two creeps were glaring at me behind dirty windows...headed *away* from me! This is where I transferred to another bus. From Oakland, my bags were checked through to Citralia . I didn't have too long 'a wait'; the next bus pulled in and within half an hour or so we were headed farther inland. Oh but this second bus was a real hoot. It was not the long distance touring design of which I had just stepped off, but an old, metro/inner city bus. Instead of individual bucket type seats we now rode on much firmer, slippery, bench seats. They were low backed and the interior was all hard, glossy surfaced and the noise level, very loud. The company had merely hung a trailer on the stern for luggage. Without accommodating baggage under the seating, like long haul coaches, the windows seemed huge and the rider was three feet closer to the ground.

The fun came with riders' carry-on personal cargoes. You would have thought I was in the burbs of Mexico City or maybe Manila. (The Manila Diary). Every hue of humanity was aboard, along with every feather, tooth and hoof. The noise was unbelievable. Many portable radios were going in several languages. Feathers were flying around. Lambs were bleating. Roosters crowed. Geese honked. It was worse than a milk run. Someone would be waiting alongside the highway with their protégé under arm and on they'd come. Lap dogs were barking at cats, and cats growling at each other and the dogs. Amazingly everyone maintained a smile as we rolled along. I suspect some of us had been chewing an exotic leaf. Who cared. We were all smiles. The true weirdos were down the road and this menagerie was rolling on, deeper and deeper into the valley in the afternoon bake.

### Your Parents' Child

No matter how badly Grandpa Pete might have wanted to get out from under the thumbs of his parents, I was still their child. I was infused with their values, and my dress of the day reiterated that fact: Hagar slacks, Roos-Atkins sports coat, Arrow shirt, Ernst tie and Floreschiem wing tips. It was one hundred and four degrees when I finally arrived in Citralia, and from there the remainder of the day progressed very ominously. Greyhound had lost my luggage. It was on its way to LA. "We will get it back for you as soon as possible. Where are you staying Mr. Hemp?" "The main fire department," I replied. "Fine, Mr. Hemp. We'll bring it right over as soon as it comes in." (Yeah, you Numbskulls I was thinking to myself.) Numbskulls was a favorite of my father's. My very, very dear friend Dick Wagner had a favorite: 'morons'. That one's mine, now. Grandpa Pete had a small carry-on sports bag containing a flashlight, toiletries, wash cloth, snacks and some water. I was four blocks from the fire department as I stepped out of the depot lobby, and I smelled *it* immediately. House fire! "Oh my God! Oh my God!" It was a smell now branded deeply into my being. I had traumatically

experienced my near extinction in my own home when it had burned six years earlier (Me And Bill). "Oh Man," I started to think: "You're going looney, Pete. Some Freud thing." Continuing on for CFD I hadn't gone a block before I walked past something not seen since I was a little spike, visiting my dad at his financial district (Market at Kearney), San Francisco office. Then it was little wooden shacks selling flowers, newspapers, smokes or shined shoes. The Citralia versions were called 'walk-ups'. They were tiny, self-contained independent food stalls, a little hut no more than ten feet in length and maybe five feet wide that remained permanently in place on the sidewalk. A door on one end afforded the single attendant's access. These little structures also had a generous roof overhang so a bloke could stand out of the rain and sun while indulging. There was a metal roll-up panel right above the standing height counter. They all served soups, chilies, hot dogs, and prepared sandwiches, stuff cooked and prepared elsewhere. (No meat cooking on site, just reheating). I couldn't resist. I had a big bowl of hot Mexican chili and all the soda crackers and ice water that I could consume, for 50 cents. Those walk-ups, more than anything else, Grandpa Pete missed when he left The Valley.

Shoving off from the walk-up, I breathed-in *that* terror inducing aroma once more. As I passed on-comers I searched for hints of their concern. None such. "You've gotta be whack-o," I kept thinking, but the smell dispersed not. Feeling the sweat rolling down my back, I could see one of the fire barns big, open bays yet a long block away; I was anxious to get in the shade of it. (It proved indeed to be ten degrees cooler.) But, it was both a great relief and a terrible discomfort to have to announce my arrival. Did I *really* want to be here, *this* much? Too late now, Bubbs. To the first man in blue that I encountered, polishing one of the rolling stock it was: "Hello sir, my name is Peter Hemp; I was to report here." "O.K. Peter, please follow me. My name is James by the way." "Thank you James."

I followed James, paralleling his big red fire truck and before passing her whole length we encountered (straight on), and walked up three concrete steps to a double landing. The door way, which opened to our left, led down a narrow passageway with rooms opening on both sides. James led me past a few of the darkened spaces before we closed in on the targeted one. Loud group laughter and bright light were emanating out the door-less arch. We strolled in, then to stand at relaxed attention. There were two, full card tables of laughing, joking, jolly looking men in dark blue dungarees and light blue long sleeves engaged in lively card play. (Of stripes I knew not.) Along one wall was an upholstered bench seat with many newspapers strewn along it. In a high nook on that wall was an AM radio drifting in and out of tune (to terrible Country/Western music).

"Captain Voght, this is Peter Hemp who was due in today." A big, real tall and distinguished looking gentleman with a silvering full head of fine hair (combed straight back), stood from his gaming, and in several strides found my offered hand.

“Hello Mr. Hemp. We were expecting you. Thank you James.” The latter now gave me a friendly slap on the shoulder from behind, and excused himself and was gone like a slick magic trick.

Captain Voght was taller than me by three inches and out-weighed me by probably twenty-five pounds. He also had the most piercing blue eyes of anyone I could ever recall. (Would have made the perfect German U-Boat Commander of filmdom.) He announced to the group that he was going to show me to my quarters and motioned me to follow him. Walking along the sterns of parallel parked trucks we came to a double open space. Along the center line of this space were two transits to and from the truck bay (where we stood), and the upper floor. One was an iron circular stairway and the other was a highly polished brass pole. The distance "tween" maybe fifteen feet. At the base of the pole was a wide, circular, thick rubber mat. Captain Voght proved no slouch climbing those stairs. Reaching the top, he led me through a screen door on a landing. Right there down the hall was the pole piercing the floor. It was approached from only one angle, controlled by an opening in a circular guard rail. The Captain told me first thing that the pole was verboten until I completed training on it, the beginning of which was a couple of weeks away. Passed the pole a short distance the hallway opened into a warren of small, high-ceilinged, screen-door'd rooms, some hosting two beds and others singly. I felt myself fortunate to discover that the room the Captain pointed out to me had only one bed in it. Aside my steel frame bed and mattress I had a small dresser and a chair. The toilets, showers and lockers were less than a dozen strides away in three, big, door-less inter-linked rooms. Two long rows of tall, wide, steel lockers sandwiched one partition wall in the changing room with long wooden benches opposite.

There *were* a few of my to-be work mates in residence, lounging and reading at the time, so introductions were made. The captain then led the way to a closed door, this a heavy wooden one, without any glass lites. It opened to the foot of a wide, wooden, steep staircase which accessed the belfry. He pointed and said: “There’s a weight-room and viewing deck up those. Don’t leave the lights on when you come down. No use after ten P.M.” It was then back down the stairs and across the sea of green to the kitchen. He explained which refrigerator was for my fresh foods if I wanted to cook for myself and laid out the kitchen ethics. From the kitchen he led me back towards the game room, pointing out the stairs down to the subterranean music room, and in the TV room, what channels were watched and when. All that pale green glossy floor. The last target of the tour which we entered was the study room, a spacious, well lighted multi-purpose room with several long tables and lots of chairs. With that all accomplished Captain Voght started to excuse himself and while walking to the door welcomed me to his lair. “What hands do you play, Peter?” “Patty-cake, Patty-cake,” I replied in a sort of apologetic chortle. “Sir, my parents are card freaks; all my relatives on both sides are card freaks. My parents and all my relatives are musical. Sir, I play Old Maid and the radio.” He accepted my quip with a genuine smile and then strode off to parlay his hand.

## My Introduction To Angie

Grandpa Pete then freshened up with a wash cloth and went to sit first in the game room. Not there more than a minute, the *panic* was back. That insidious odor had infiltrated the castle keep. I studied everyone. They were either absolutely oblivious to the threat, or I was somehow psychologically manufacturing the sensations. Of the two scenarios, which would be better odds? These guys were 'old timer' firemen, veterans of many conflagrations, and I was a 'greenie'. If catastrophic combustion was brewing, and it was detectable with a human nose, would not these pros know well before I would. I had to believe so. Anyway, I never saw men so enjoy their card playing. There were many flushed faces. I continued to hang out with "the guys" for about an hour or so and then drifted over to the TV room. Sitting on a real long overstuffed leather sofa in a practically 'slide-off' posture was this giant in track attire with a white terry head band encircling a buzz cut. He appeared to be asleep. Four feet away on the same sofa I started to sit down as quietly and carefully as possible when something terrible happened. The only other time I experienced this source and level of embarrassment was just several years ago. Well, before Grandpa Pete was all the way butt-on-cushion a giant, overtly loud escape of methane dashed out of me. "Whopes!!!" From absolute rest to full alert, this giant reclining body appeared to vibrate for a second or two before springing straight up, saucer sized eyes of surprise saying: "What da ....? My new acquaintance's name: Mr. Angie Connors, from Baaast'n Mass. A discus thrower was this Angie, all six-seven, two-hundred and fifty-pounds worth. Angie was a returnee. He had served the school year prior. Angie's interest while at the college was philosophy. At the firehouse: jazz. "Man, you dig Dizzy, Parker, Monk? Se habla Cannonball? Morton?" Me: "Oh..... Well.....I dunno." "Man, you can't be for real! What planet do you come from!?" From me: "Hey! You! Do you smell anything?" "Did you do another one!?!?" "No! No. Do *you* smell something *burning*?" Sniff, sniff. "Naaaa." Did Grandpa Pete smell something burning? Yes he did. "Dea wanna listen to some sides of mine? C'mon. Before it's dinner time. Have you been down to the sound room?"

In a basement sound proof room the fire boys had a great turn table backed up with a strong amp and excellent speakers. They also had some wonderful stereo head phones. As Angie was getting his music out he asked me: "Have you met Sour Olive yet?" "Who/what's this olive?" "Hmmm.... Well.... you'll meet him here pretty quick." 'Me and Angie' spent an honest hour in the studio listening to his favorite tracks. Then, we climbed the stairs to the deck (truck bays), where he said adios and headed to the showers.

## Flab, Pimples And Warts

I wandered out the back door of the truck bays and onto a rear parking lot shared by big, low, real long, wooden, hose drying racks. A guy on a Honda dirt bike (Moto Wayne), was zooming around on the rear wheel only, climbing and racing down the racks. He was a big, swarthy, hairy limbed, helmet less, mean looking dude with coal black four day whiskers. "Oooh, I think I'll cut *him* lots of space." Outback *that* horrid smell was now stronger than ever. "Oh God there's gotta be a fire or I'm sure as shit off my rocker." It was then around six o'clock in the evening. The sun had been setting around 9:00 or a bit after. I nervously searched the sky for telltale smoke or falling cinders. None of either. Just then a beat up old blue pickup entered the only and two directional drive way. It parked very near where I stood and the driver didn't dilly dally in the cab. He was out and walking towards me quickly. There could be no mistake. Here approaching me was a big, fat, homely olive shaped human life form. Poor fellow. His moniker was to prove true: sour to boot. And I immediately could sense why. To combat his Ugly (big) Duckling syndrome he had embraced football. "Are you our new foolball player?" he asked me. I introduced myself and we spoke gridiron for a spell. The reasons for are fuzzy, but somehow due to politics, as an out of district student I was not eligible to play sports my first year. Sour Olive was a returnee, a local boy and a *grand* braggart. It didn't take long to feel I had sufficiently indulged him with a generous ear, and I was getting impatient by the time he went on his way. Although I really wanted to know if he smelled *it* too I did not want to encourage any further conversation. I bit my lip. Angie, so right. So sour. The Olive then thankfully waddled off to the back door and disappeared.

While still out back and watching Moto Wayne continue doing his thing, two more vehicles entered the lot. There was no mistaking Danny and Ray for regulars. Danny Dye was tall, tall, tall. He had to be a basketball player, and Ray was a bantam weight, holding a tennis racket and both had college kid written all over them. Standing next to each other, Mutt and Jeff. I liked Danny immediately. He radiated good nature ness, had brown-black, short curls and the shiniest, laughing, obsidian eyes I have ever seen. A constant grin and a good, big laugh would later claim trademarks. He hailed from Clovis, which was a half-hour drive to the northeast. I don't remember the town Ray hailed from. We probably gabbed for fifteen minutes out there before deciding to join the crowd inside. Both Danny and Ray being locals, they had already been 'in residence' for weeks, and were no strangers to the game room. For feeling such at ease with each I asked them if they smelled anything *odd*. Their replies: negative. (*More* evidence I was hallucinating?) We walked back and into the TV room. After too many stupid quiz shows and car dealer spiels, at some point we began discussing dinner options. Just then Angie showed up. It was still really hot, at least mid-nineties; no one wanted to cook. "Don't Cook Tonight..... Call Chicken Delight." Anyone recall that jingle? We decided on take-out, delivered. Fried



chicken it was. I don't remember if it was CD. There, then, delivery times were pretty mediocre. After dinner there was the days final bull session in the game room with most of the 'jock-men' (peanut gallery), lined up on the bench. Angie just then walked into the room while stuffing a left-over dinner roll into his mouth when our world caved-in.

## Hot Time

*Alarms:* Ear piercing banging-bells! Gut wrenching oohga's! "Dive! Dive! Dive!" MORE alarms. All of a sudden it was the closing scene from "Das Boot". A punched-paper ticker tape that ran around near the ceilings, even passing through conduit to other rooms, began moving, accompanied by a loud, clunking sound along with more nerve torture alarms sounding every several seconds. The regulars in the game room reacted on second nature. They were immediately climbing into fire suits and starting up fire engines, all of them, even the hand-cranked 1918 Sea Grave hook and ladder. Angie, being a returnee, was also out the door immediately. Danny and Ray having been hanging around for several weeks familiarizing themselves with *some* of the protocols were out the door a bit more timidly, but already out the door. *They* had been issued gear and had completed a few training sessions.

The noise of roaring diesel engines in that barn was ear damaging. It got worse. In the game room, I was the last one sitting (in my slacks and wing-tips). Now, at the door: "Hey! Get up! Come! We can use you," yelled Captain Voght. "Who me? I haven't had any training." "We'll tell you what we want done. Get out here and get a helmet and jacket." He wasn't going away, and I was becoming an irritant, I could see. "Oh maaaaann. Me in my good duds." I got up and the Captain found me a jacket, helmet, and smoke mask, but no pants or boots. I had to go in slacks and wing-tips. "Damnnn." He followed me out the door and pointed to the rear step/platform of the big red pumper, the first truck encountered. Two arms, from different garments, reached down and grabbed my jacketed shoulders. Up I went and was put furthest to starboard. "Me-Oh-My..... what am I doing here?"

The now closed, big bay doors (for all trucks), started to slowly swing open. When split by mere inches, the bright red-orange glow in the crack could have been mistaken for sunset. But the sun had been down a good spell already. That wasn't sunset. As they opened wide, it was a sky on fire, raining cinders. I immediately thought of Dresden, or London during the war. Was this the same color from a distance? Now all sirens started up, first in a wolf like cadence and then as their rpms fell into near-sync, the scream became a blend in constant flux.

Next, a heavy thud and big vibrations were felt under foot. The truck jumped and started for the open bay door. After exiting the portico, staring at the night on fire, I was thinking I had made a wrong decision when choosing Citralia. Angie, first personnel to my left, hip-banged me and started doing some mime, a tutorial on how to properly grip the overhead bar and how to form a stance. It turned out that later on I learned it was very easy to be jettisoned off the rear when the truck bottomed out in ruts or hit speed bumps too fast. It could not have been more than thirty seconds outta the barn when it became obvious that as we entered a narrow street at a fast rate of speed (with five hundred gallons of H<sub>2</sub>O on board), we did so without a turning radius for full forgiveness. While into this tack (left turn), our "ship" took several fifty-pounders at close range. Glad we were on terra-firm a. Boom! Boom! Boom! The truck rolled up on starboard while obviously trying to occupy space already spoken for. We "slows down" for two seconds and the noises of screeching metal are ice picks in the ears. Then, a big lump, lump, lump and the truck leveled off and I was looking back over my shoulder at wreckage. Luckily there were no one in the cars....the parking meters licking the ground. We kept going (hit and run!) We had a four alarm to attend to.

Being the greenie on deck, whatever science and logic were being executed was lost on Grandpa Pete I was just along for the ride. Oh how I wished that had been the case. The truck finished going around two blocks, looking for the hydrants it wanted (color coded). Soon my truck stopped and the regulars began their massive plumbing experiment: several suction hoses arriving, many 4 and 3 inch high pressure leaving. Grandpa Pete was on the northwest side of a six story brick hotel, most of a long block long. It was built in 1906. The San Francisco earthquake didn't take this one down. Water did (with my help). There were rumors, but just rumors. A physician on the fourth floor was thought to have been burning records (in a waste basket), dealing with illegal activities. The curtains caught fire--you know, the whole Hollywood thing. Half the ground floor was a big pharmacy and the rest, numerous professional offices. The building design was one of an adapted, standard Roman house. A big, open rectangle. On the sixth floor, there was a glass atrium ceiling covering the lobby and court down on the first floor. Two grand stairwells at the east and west ends went up to the sixth. There was an industrial, solo lift for staff and a small lift for residents, the majority of whom were elderly. Before the full contingent of fire fighters arrived, most all residents were evacuated. Some did need gurney service and those regulars trained in that were hard at it.

From the first moments my truck arrived until maybe ten minutes later my memory is a blank. Grandpa Pete "came to" struggling in the west stairway, along with three others, pulling a four-inch hose upstairs. I heard some officer yell "Fourth Floor!" Well, we had maybe gone half way to third when the slack hose swelled up like a giant anaconda. It had me and Danny pinned to two walls on a landing. I felt like a butterfly mounted to a card. Maybe it was Angie, but someone left the building and within a few minutes the hose relaxed a bit. Then

our lead hose man bled-off the nozzle and the hose went limp again. Next it was upward and onward once more. What I did not learn, but later, was the hose clamp that someone outside had applied to the hose to prevent flow, failed (came undone), and a heavy, threaded iron shaft with handle spun out of the clamp and took off into the night sky like a rocket. What goes up, must come down. Mercifully no one was beamed. With the clamp action gone missing the hose fattened right back up once more. A second clamp held, and we made the fourth floor.

I don't remember for sure which regular was first to lead me that night. Whoever manned the nozzle I was ballast directly behind him, and four of us total held the hose on the ground (carpet). The fires deep rumble first audible on the second floor, on the fourth was a loud roar. The building was also solid smoke. Our low-tech charcoal filter masks failed within fifteen minutes. I think it might have been Duane who was our leader. He pulled back on the nozzles large lever and we began sending fogging clouds of water down the hallway. Here's where the science comes in. Heat, fuel, and oxygen make the Triangle of Fire. Remove any one, and the fire cycle breaks. Maybe Duane saw fogging as the best choice. At first, I thought it had little discernible effect. But he was an experienced regular. He ought to have known what he was doing. Grandpa Pete sure as hell didn't. Other patterns were also tried. We were using lots of water, for combined with the terrible temperatures, bits of soggy ceiling plaster began falling. Next we encountered dangling electrical wiring and it was still *live*! I was getting shocked, wading in six inches of water! (Submerged leather wing tips). Grandpa Pete admits he was frightened to death. Soon the results of our over challenged smoke protection gear started taking its toll. Our leader (Duane?), suddenly crumbled and dropped into the dirty seas right in front of me. Angie, behind me, being the biggest and the strongest picked up Duane, laid him over his shoulder and started for the street. Because I was right behind Duane I grabbed the nozzle.

What I discovered right quickly, was, the recoil of opening the nozzle too fast was not dissimilar to holding the trigger down on a fully auto AK or like appliance. Another thing I found out very quickly was that the loss of Angie's and Duane's mass lent the hose a life of its own. My pea brained rational was: the fire is not containable at the rate of water we are applying. Therefore, more might be best. I pulled back on the big, bar lever, and the hose and nozzle almost jumped out of my grasp. As I pulled it further open, the stream concentrated and started blasting plaster off lath and lath off studs and rafters, and doors off hinges. A veritable liquid building eraser it was. "This is good." More bail. Stronger blast. On my next adjustment, I lost it. The hose picked up me and Danny off the submerged hallway carpet and started slamming us into one wall and then another. I could not manage to close the nozzle while being thrown around so forcibly. It was a Catch-22. As me and Danny rode the canvass bronco, doors, ceilings, walls were blown away like leaves in a jet blast. It gave me a huge sense of power even though I had lost control of it. I knew if we didn't hang on, the hose, if free,

would probably homogenize us. Danny was a farm body. He and his dad drilled wells. He was tough. Angie, thank goodness, just then returned and took control. His added weight also provided the needed ballast.

When Angie took over though, he used the same m.o. The three of us went back to being Flash Gordon but this time held onto it. Boy. Just think what Flash could have done against the Mud People if he had had such a weapon. The water in the hall was now a small, fast stream. We moved slowly down it, headed east. As we blew apart rooms and doused flames, we opened hippo sized holes in the inner apartments. All the while, we were operating in a red cotton candy smoke. I knew there were many others battling the blaze also, but had no knowledge of where they were. As we were working towards the east end, blasting our way, we spied some large blob in the stream, moving towards us. It was a person, crawling on its hands and knees. When we got close enough for a good look, the shock turned to mirth. It was Sour Olive, our big braggart. He was absolutely green and useless, a smoke casualty of another crew somewhere in the building. Head down he crawled past us following our hose to the top of the stairs. There, a double-hung window he raised. By now thousands of citizens had ringed the blocks around the blaze. Nothing this big had happened in Citralia for a long time, if ever. The police were hard at work controlling the crowds. Fire companies from neighboring communities were showing up to offer aid. I was too far away to witness the event, but some spectators on the ground recounted days later what transpired. Olive, after hoisting the window bent out and ejected his innards onto the blazing night air. After repetitive big heaves he witnessed the crowds now staring back up at him. Someone down below yelled "Olive, is that you?" which brought a roar of laughter. Olive *surely* turned even greener. The open window was also not a good move. Shortly an officer appeared, slammed the window closed and helped Olive out of the building. Didn't see my fellow foolsballer again for several days. (He was in-hospital.)

Controlling the air supply that feeds a fire is a critical advantage. The fewer openings in the building, the less the chimney effect. I was still with my group on the fourth floor making our way back to the west stair to begin an assault on the fifth. Well, it turned out that the Sea Grave hook and ladder, on its first set-up, parked too close to the building. What caused the ladder to rise and extend was an ingenious hand-cranked pneumatic piston arrangement. There was an integral, impressively long, large tank (in relation to the truck chassis), that was compressed with air by the manual cranking of two, big, crank handles by four men. Gauges told the operator how much 'air' was needed for a pneumatic piston to raise and extend the ladder to different story heights. In operation it made a very noisy, combination clunk and bell ring report. It was never admitted but 'me-thinks' on that occasion over sufficient energies were employed to fill the tank. When the control lever was actuated the ladder took flight. So well did it do that it shot up all six stories and punctured the wide, wooden soffit of the very generous roof overhang. The tip of the ladder was hung up in the structure and could not be extricated. A 'regular' climbed all the way up and with an axe, chopped away the structure to free the ladder.

Then the ladder was lowered and the truck was driven around the block, tediously weaving among other units, and re-set. These rigs don't parallel park very easily. This time the distance from the building was acceptable, but another glitch developed.

Strung in and out of the rungs of the ladder was a four inch high pressure canvas hose. At the top it served a gimbaled valve and nozzle. Opposed to a bail or lever for actuation the operator turned the “summer squash” wheel shaped outside edge of the nozzle. Left to close, right to open (opposite intuition). Like other nozzles, when first opening a fog or mist is produced. The more turns the stronger the jet of water becomes. This was well before the sophistication of today’s mobile communications. It was mega-phones (bull horns), on the ground and hand signals replying. Well, whoever was sent aloft on the ladder the second time around was not demonstrating a thorough understanding of the equipment. The stream from the nozzle did not meet with the brass’s approval. So instructions were: give more water--give more water. To comply the aerialist kept spinning the wheel. All of a sudden the nozzle separated from the body of the valve and was blasted right into the exterior wall and remained embedded. Rather than move the truck again to get at that ‘tick’ of a nozzle the ladder was lowered and the entire valve was replaced. Unbeknownst to me and Angie and Danny the 'brass' decided that the fifth and sixth floors were toast regardless of what our efforts had been or would be. Someone made the decision to break a hole in the glass atrium ceiling and send water down from above. Bad mistake, in my naive opinion. I felt the draw immediately. The winds now howled up the stairways and the fire freshened up tremendously. Soon we ourselves were being water bombed by the invaders from the compromised roof. The flames rebounded so dramatically that a huge portion of the glass roof burst open to the night sky in an explosion. That was when my team began a withdrawal back down the fourth floor stairs. We hadn’t got far when Captain Voght appeared carrying an arm load of fire axes. He told us to start chopping holes in the hallway. I looked down at the water rushing passed my legs and realized it was fast enough to run a sluice box. A big one. We were not given time to ask questions. “Just follow orders. Good Men.”

At the time I knew by rote the weight of a cubic foot of water. It didn’t take me too long to extrapolate that this buildings structural integrity might be influenced by all this moving water. Five floors of it was a hell of a moving weight. So we chopped and chopped and chopped. When we had chopped the second floor and were finally on the first we should have stopped and punched holes in the ends of the building. That’s only my personal opinion. What happened as a result of our actions (kept chopping floors), we knew soon by aromas. The building drained so fast and furiously right through the plaster ceiling of the ground floor into the pharmacy the deluge knocked over row upon row of shelving, bursting and blending everything from mouthwash, shampoo, perfumes, hair treatments, household cleaners, you name it. The chemical reactions were such that the entire pharmacy filled with the foamed amalgam to the ceilings and as a result some of the plate glass front

windows blew out. One of our firemen on the sidewalk narrowly missed being sliced like a cabbage by the breaking glass. Out the broken windows then flowed a gigantic foam dragon. Sparkling in fantastic colors it snaked down Main Street at an amazing rate. (Would have made an impressive sci-fi monster.) At this point the hotel was but a smoldering shell. A big pile of *now* very unstable bricks. Looking back, what had we accomplished? Other than possibly saving a fair chunk of downtown we did an almost 'controlled burn' of a six story hotel. I'll bet some community fire districts would love to have such a training opportunity, if risks could be kept to a minimum. It was one hell of a way to be broken-in though. I don't remember how many hours we went non-stop but it was a long, long time, and it sure went a long way towards a group bonding. I now wish I had saved the local papers that immediately reported the event.

### The Badge/Bikinis/Dread

Grandpa Pete didn't think our uneven fire-fighting efforts were unduly criticized by the citizenry. Seeing and making some of those gaffs left me surprisingly pragmatic. First, no one died. We got a lot of training. And, the insurance industry had to cough up some bucks for a much better, healthier development. It was directly following this fire that I was invited into every bar and tavern and bowling alley in town and given a free drink: "...just show the badge." The three movie houses did the same. A free pass for me and a date, anytime? "Just show the badge?" Where else could a young college kid ever find such perks? Well, Grandpa Pete even found a *better* deal yet in Citralia, which I'll illuminate, downstream.

Several weeks after we had recouped, the chief wanted to revisit some long proven equipment drills. Every Thursday afternoon until weather said otherwise, we would be in-drill. While the weather was still warm we first did a lot of hose and nozzle work. (What pressures to run for hose diameter/lengths and altitude; affects on nozzle pressure and flow, etc.) Now, it just so happened that some of the town's most daring talent, in bikinis, in their daddies' convertibles began taunting us jock men hose trainees by slowly driving nearby while bouncing and writhing and laughing and waving. We went out of our way not to discourage them. We pretended to *try* and hose them down, always purposely thirty or so feet short. Wasn't too long, one early, hot, summer evening before we coaxed a open rag top into range. Four of us on a four inch let'em have it, filling the car in seconds. The screams were magnificent. We had some topless exposure to boot. But seriously, how to carry and handle hoses were important basics. A bundle of four inch, fifty foot long, weighed ninety pounds. Those were the old days of layered hemp fabric construction and heavy, solid brass fittings. Today it's synthetics and aluminum.

Ladders were another very important subject for training. Again, this was many years ago, before the plastics revolution. Our ladders were the extension type. Twenty foot and forty foot were standard. These were made of hardwood with steel and iron fittings. One man was trained to lift, carry and set up a twenty-footer. Two men were employed for a forty-footer. For plucking one up from the ground, un-extended, it required a special movement similar to that of getting under a hundred pound back pack and getting it on without any help. Regardless of twenty or forty footer, there is a body throwing aspect that cannot be half-hearted. If you were insincere the attempted feat fell flat, a health risk in itself. One of the most challenging drills required of Grandpa Pete was a ladder climb carrying a bundle of four-inch. In preparation for this drill, four ropes were attached to the top section of a 'forty'. The ladder was set and hauled up to full extension, *vertically*, and the four ropes held taught by fellows, spaced out equally, maintained equilibrium. A group of regulars stood by holding a Life Net in case we fell. We trainee jock men had to pick up the hose bundle and climb the ladder to the top. Not only that. Once at the top we had to swing a leg over the uppermost rung and climb down on the opposite side, all this while the ladder *seemed* to be swinging wildly in every direction. Now when I pick up an aluminum or fiberglass ladder I chuckle.

The only unpleasant aspect of daily life in the station, which I dreaded, was ambulance duty. For a week every five I pulled it dusk to dawn. Sometimes I had a good night's sleep. Some shifts I never got to bed. (I witnessed some amazing blood and guts events and still have an occasional nightmare from those days.) Aside from serving the greater Citralia region, every so often our municipal department had to provide ambulance service for Highway 99 (pre I-5), from Coalinga to almost Fresno. We had two ambulances. One was brand new, a big Pontiac Bonneville. The other one was a dated Cadillac. Sometimes when things got busy, both would be in service. But luckily most of the time the Caddy sat parked. Response time was always critical especially for stroke and cardiac events. Depending upon the day and the hour we could almost second guess the incoming call. Friday and Saturday nights would produce knife wounds or worse at various "mean" bars. We'd also get calls for heart attack and stroke right after breakfast (bacon and eggs), and the dinner hour. Any more than three minutes of cardiac arrest without resuscitation usually spelled doom. So how quickly help arrived was always paramount, and always pressing on us. It's beyond my ability to accurately describe to you the flavors and the intensity of angst experienced on some missions of mercy. And the let down and disappointment when you lost a 'close' one could be with you for moons.

## Pea Soup

Growing up on San Francisco Bay, Grandpa Pete thought he knew what fog was. Far from it! That Fall in Tulare County this 'tule sailor' saw his worst soup. Absolutely debilitating. One night we got a cardiac emergency. It was also, truly, a night of the densest fog in all of my experience. James was driver. We knew (between card hands), that it was an impressively foggy night and we had been praying that we'd not be drawn out into it. No such luck. A Code-4 sounded. James and I were preparing Porto Bella's and steaks at that moment. 'Me and James' were real hungry. We were also staring at an opaque wall of white when the bay doors opened. Our headlights could gouge maybe six feet. This (sadly), was well before cell phone and GPS. We had radio contact to 'The Barn'. We had map books. We had a compass. We had an address. We had to get there quickly. We could only creep that night in that soup. I could walk faster than James could prod the "wagon." We could only guesstimate intersections. For positive ID I had to leave the safety of the cab to go look for a street sign that should be only fifteen feet from my door, or thereabouts. And if and when finding it, had to get my nose up the pole to note the street name. All the while the growing angst is building in the back of your skull. "They'll be goners before we can find them," is now crowding your conscience. That night we did lose a close one. I am sure that if it had not been for that insidious fog we would have arrived in time to save a life.

There were also rumors that on occasion the old Caddy would be spotted, after dark, parked in a secluded area not far from town.

Mates losing mates to heart attacks and stroke was always a tough one but the carnage out on the highway was the hardest to take. We had plasticized deer bags and chrome plated snow shovels on board. Sometimes we had to leave the puzzle to the coroner. It was always saddest when children were involved. I never ceased dreading ambulance duty. It had one reward in a macabre way though, never to the degree that I wouldn't have wished full release of duty in preference. These were the days of savings stamps: S & H, Blue Chip, Green Stamps, Gold Seal, etc. If on a busy shift we picked up someone/s already dead, we were allowed to deposit the deceased at the closest undertakers so we could continue to aid living souls. But, there was a competitive spirit alive and well amongst the mortuary/funeral homes. If highway traffic was behaving itself we could be feeding parlors heart and stroke casualties. If it *was* a time of carnage out on the white line we could be feeding them "puzzles," and to the local hospitals the still breathing. Angie came to me one day and said: "Pete, I waaana get this," pointing to some luggage in a stamp catalog. "How many books of *these* (stamps) do you have? I'll trade you for ...?" Each mortuary gave a different stamp from its immediate neighbor. We had 'long' memories' (notebook), on which houses gave which stamps. If the person/persons was/were already dead, we couldn't find scorn amongst us for delivering the former living to an after death service which 'thanked' you



with the savings stamps most coveted at the moment. As a result we accrued lots of prizes like sports equipment and cameras and clothes and stuff like that. Diamond ear rings were also a lively topic. But again, Grandpa Pete wishes to reiterate: I'd gladly have given up the savings stamps if I could have escaped the total exercise. But as result of my life saving training I *was* able to rescue a few souls over the years after I had left the fire department.

### Kookie's Bucksaw

Can't remember how many weeks I had been ensconced in the department but I decided that I could use a little more money than what I was making, there. Preparing my own meals did not pan out very well and I had started a tab at Molly's Coffee Shop just a couple of blocks from the department. Molly (Mrs. Kuntsman), carried tabs for a lot of the cops and fire department staff. She was a large, jolly, late-middle aged woman. Her husband, Arthur, did most of the cooking. He was a short, stooped, sad eyed elderly gentleman whom I never heard speak one word. Because I enjoyed eating so much I tended to have zero bucks left over at the end of the month after paying off Molly. I thought if I could just make twenty bucks or so on Saturdays I'd have some spending jingle for the week. Angie recommended that I pay a visit to Citralia Lumber Company and inquire. He said a former jock man who left our ranks the year before had worked for them on Saturdays. It was an easy walking distance so I gave it a go. The yard was open Saturdays from 7:00 A.M. to 12:00 noon. . I introduced myself at the front desk and was told to take a seat while someone found the boss. I always had a 'soft' spot for old fashioned lumber yards. That's probably because I spent so much time in them accompanying Dad on his missions while I was an adolescent. I felt good vibes when I walked into VLC.

The boss (owner), a Mr. Ray Noble, arrived shortly and introductions were made, and after a leisurely and friendly meeting of the minds I was welcomed to join his team. The following Saturday morning I was at work. For the first several Saturdays I cut to length (with a buck saw), long, large (expensive), beams for different customers' projects. I liked the job because I could work by myself and the beams were in a quiet, far off portion of the yard. I'd also get a weird feeling of power, cutting something so expensive. "Measure, measure and re-measure" Made not one screw-up. From the buck saw I tried the fork lift. That was a lot of fun for a while, too. Until I dropped and damaged a three unit load of very expensive Philippine mahogany plywood. Surprisingly, I was invited to compete in the next 'Straddle/Fork Grand-Prix.' The straddle was an odd looking vehicle. Basically it was an inverted U-shaped carrier with standard looking truck type wheels which all steered. It would drive over (straddle) units of lumber, lift them just inches and schlep them around the yard where needed. It only operated on relatively flat ground, preferably paved. The company also had a rail

siding. It was maybe a half a block down a very sad, pot-holed, wide path. At the siding an experienced operator using a small fork would empty the rail car and I would transport the contents back with the big fork over the unimproved 'way' to Ray's warehouses. I could carry three in one bite what the little fork did in one. On the day of a race, after cargoes were secured and after the office was closed and certain employees had gone home, we'd stage the event. A course would be laid utilizing existing pathways throughout the premises. We also used stacked units of lumber to make course changes. It resembled a big maze. The contestants would start, from the same point, in opposite directions and the first one to return after going both ways was the winner. Forklifts are easier to drive going backwards and the visibility is far better. They remind me of how the big, orange crawdads move around in the clear waters of the Hay Fork, also going backwards. (When they do go forward they mimic the movement of D-9 Caterpillars.) The fork that I drove was an old Hyster twenty-ton. The straddle was a circa 1950 Ross. After assembling the course one of the racers would creep along the entire route to make sure there was sufficient turning room.

All told four or maybe five drivers would compete. Yours Truly wasn't even in the running, of course. This lumber yard job was my introduction to the mode. But it was fun and exciting. Ouch. Once there was an almost terrible incident that involved the straddle. Freddy was going into a corner at a clip we all agreed was a bit "ballsy." Intuition proved correct: Freddy lost it. Thankfully, after he was thrown off, the well-bundled, longest units of rough fir planks were stout enough to prevent the rig from going completely on its side and Freddy escaped serious injury. With the help of the big fork the straddle was quickly righted and raced yet again. Citralia Lumber had sturdy stuff, including a very sturdy portable barbecue for promotional use. So on race days we'd come well stocked with links and burgers and corn on the cob, you name it but no alcohol.

One of my Saturday's at the yard proved to be a most profitable one. I was on my way to the office at quitting time when I was approached by one of the full time employees carrying a black leather jacket. It looked brand new. "Pete. I think you'd be a perfect fit. I've had this jacket for years but have never worn it—too big. I brought it in today to see if you might want to buy it. I paid over a hundred dollars for it. If it fits and you want it, give me ten bucks and it's yours." I tried the jacket on. It fit like a glove, and the lining felt very good on my bare arms. (Oh for an Indian motorcycle.) The garment was of very good quality. "You gotta deal Bob. Can you wait until payday?" "Sure. I'm glad I found a good home for it." Entering the office I found Mr. Noble engaged in conversation with a woman accompanied by a small boy who shared some features with him. I was hoping that I could walk the short distance to the time clock and then retreat to the door before their conversation ended. But, immediately after 'punching out', Mr. Noble signaled me to approach them. I somehow sensed the lady might be Mrs. Noble. Right I was. The casually attired Mrs. Noble had a heart-warming smile and I could see that she was comfortable in her skin. In the mere minute of our engagement I also sensed this woman

wielded power. The following Saturday I found out just how much: “Mr. Hemp. Good Morning.” “Hello Sir.” “Say Peter, I have a favor to ask of you.” “Yes Sir. Sure. What can I do?” “My wife wants to borrow you to help her prepare for a big shin dig coming up. Would you mind terribly if I asked you to help her out today around the ranch?” “Oh no Sir. Whatever I can do, Sir.” “She’s going to come and pick you up.” “Very well, Sir.” “Thank you again Peter.” Mrs. Noble did arrive and soon I was headed to their home out on Golf Links Drive. This was the beginning of the *best deal* I have ever landed, one that I previously gave mention. Starting that morning Mrs. Noble had me dusting high corners, then cleaning high windows and then wiping ceilings and all of a sudden it was time for lunch. Great food! Cold, quality brew included, right there at the kitchen island. Fantastic! Their little boy, I cannot remember his name, impressed me as bright. Then, full and satisfied, it was kneeling on pads pulling weeds in the flower gardens. And by ‘times-up’ I was positioning color in planted pots. For me that was a fun, whole day, getting fed a good meal to boot. At the end of that long Saturday Mrs. Noble asked me which I liked better, working around the house with her or working over at ‘the yard’. Grandpa Pete was no dummy, then. (Can't say that lasted long.) Working in your boss’s house, no straining, getting fed his food, drinking his beer, at his table? “Oh Mrs. Noble, I like working for youuu.”

Like escaping ‘The Bubba’s for Tiny, I now escaped The Yard for pampered domestic help and never regretted that decision. I felt so genuinely close to the Nobles after just several Saturdays working for them in their home. In time it was discovered that my neck, arm and inseam were those of Ray’s. Saturdays got more interesting. I’d be driving one of their cars around Citralia with a to-do list. “Go get measured here; pick up Ray's shirts at so and so’s; also, the dry cleaners, and there’s an order ready at the wine shop.” In between ‘campaigns’ I could jump in the pool and relax. Tell me. Anyone. What better gig could a young knave ever dream? I was he. He was I. The Nobles were also (even though I didn’t quite understand, then), another blessing: they were a family that I could cling to during my first year of *rude awakening*. They also must have seen *something* in Grandpa Pete to provide him with their brand new 1962 Lincoln Continental Convertible, with gas card, for *dates*. “Kookie” had his wheels after all, and fine ones they were!

## Holdouts

According to Wikipedia the fireman’s pole, or fire pole was invented by Chicago resident David Kenyon in the 1870’s. I have little doubt that somewhere in the lower 48 you still can still find one in use. But because of insurance issues and smarter architects/engineers they are no longer so popular. After completing my pole training I was do’n the slide with pride. We were not allowed to use the pole to merely go downstairs on a daily living basis. One of the biggest hazards of the pole was ‘doing it’ totally in your sleep. Many times I came to on

the back of the truck as we raced to a call. When you are really still asleep, but up and reaching for the pole, there's a chance that you will not hug/grip the pole properly or you will let go on the way down or you have a bad landing at the bottom. All the possibilities spell pain or worse. On more than one occasion I wondered where I got the bruise on my lip or the sore ankle. Never had to wonder long. But it was a big deal to my psyche. The shiny brass pole used to be a big part of little boys' dreams. All of the old, illustrated children's tales revered the status of fireman and invariably the brass, shiny pole was prominently represented. And even in real life it was fast--I'll say that.

Another romantic hold out was the Life Net. It perhaps holds a more potent association with the public for firemen's icons than the fire pole. Invented by Thomas Browder and patented in 1887 this hand held trampoline-like piece of life saving equipment saved many lives but it had its limits, high falling heights being the main one. With the advent of sophisticated "snorkel" trucks which lift firemen via hydraulics many story heights to rescue stranded souls, the life net went the way of the Dodo. But during Grandpa Pete's involvement with CFD they were still prominently embraced. CFD deployed them while the department conducted the ladder climbing drill. Eventually all of us jock men had (in lieu of a better word), to jump off the roof, once, just to experience its function. All your buddies down below would be taunting and insulting you, calling you "chicken" and worse, daring you to jump. A roof's eve looks a *lot* higher when you are standing there, peering down, than from on the ground, looking up. I will not deceive; I was *petrified* over the decision to jump, but due to peer pressure, I did. Alas, however, I never enjoyed the flattering experience of manning the net to save the scantily clad maiden from the licking flames.

## Deviate Holdout

Next, Grandpa Pete is going to mention (confess), an activity that I for sure want my descendants to understand that by no means would it be fair to say that this activity would occur anywhere (in other fire departments), but with Peter, or Angie, or maybe Peter and Angie at the Church Street Station. The rest of the jock men were too honest, I *thought*, at the time. Now and then it just worked out that all of the activities (other than smoke checks, which I'll mention later), commonly occurring, would sometimes stack up unfavorably between two shifts. "Hey man. The last five 690's have been on my shift. Jeeze! What goes here?" Or "Oh man. How many more CPR gigs do I have to do before I see Jones on one?" Well, it so happened that one time an alarm went off while I was in the shower, just following a former call. The first call woke me up and now another one right on its heels? I also suspect it that might have been during class finals. (Why else would I have behaved the way I did.) But I remember *this* time just stepping into my locker and pulling the door closed.

(There were plenty of other able bodies. I was not risking public safety.) Soon I began hearing my name: “Peter! Peter! Peter!” Then the engines roared, the sirens screamed and within minutes, it was relatively quiet again, and I went to bed. The next afternoon after returning from campus: “Where were you last night?” “Up in the weight room, listening to the Kingston Trio on my *ear phones*. Why?” “Ohhhhh” (There was no alarm in that high up isolated room.) I later learned that others *had* been admonished for what they did not catch me at. But as a precaution, the officers started sending a confederate with bat in hand who would parade through the locker room banging on the lockers. The noise was such like no human ears could survive. Over time they caught a few ‘rats’. None was Grandpa Pete.

### Brew-ski’s In The Pipe

For several weeks that late fall our skies went from blue to rusty-brown. T’was sad. The valley was on the cusp of the fruit harvest. As long as the temperatures remained threatening to orchard culture the waste oil smudge pots kept burning. I was told it could be weeks or a month. On some days visibility on the sidewalks of downtown Citralia could be as low as three hundred feet. It was terrible for drivers and pedestrians alike but it didn’t stop Grandpa Pete from frequenting the walk ups to get his chili fixes. (This is when I was introduced to taking an ice cube to the toilet the morning after eating fire hot spiced foods.) The final live-hose drill scheduled for the season also happened to fall on one of these smudgy days. Instead of the practice taking place within the first or second block of the station on healthy hydrants as usual, the Chief wanted us to do something different: revisit *Methods Of Emergency Water Supply*.

Most of our practice sessions were conducted by Capt. Voght and Sergeant Hasslet and when we’d reach a level of proficiency agreeable to them, the Assistant Chief would usually visit the drill and for ten minutes stand around as we went through the hoops and then he’d politely salute us as a group, or tip his hat and be gone. The only time I saw the Chief at a drill was at our very first ladder drill and then at our celebratory demonstration for such. Not only was the Chief anxious to focus our attentions to the emergency water source drill, but *he* wanted to personally lead us in its execution. What’s this? I had a hunch he had something up his sleeve. The newspapers had spent their angles reporting on the recent Big Fire. Of late both the Chiefs had become accustomed to entertaining the press. Was what the shrinking situation now called for something ‘feel good and flashy’? Colorful, bright, polished fire trucks are always good photo ops. But our poor chief, he was about to experience what Grandpa Pete would wager was his apogee of embarrassments. I don’t recall who, whether plural or singly, took the rap, but the ensuing debacle *was* actually hilarious.

“Hey man, bring your mosquito repellent.” “What the hell are you talking about, Angie?” “Ooooooh, you didn’t hear, eh?” “Come on, come on what’s going on?” “Well, the *rumor* is we’re off to some swanky address to suck out a swimming pool.” “Why the hell do that?” “Some friend of the Chief’s wants his pool drained on the pronto, and we’re going to do it as a drill. And don’t be surprised if the Press materialize.” “No one’s died there recently....I trust?” “What the hell you talk’n about?” “Oh nuthun.” “It’s also quite possible we’ll do a rural shoot, either the golf course or maybe an orchard somewhere.” “Huhhh?” “And it’s dress blues too, kiddo! Have the feeling catastrophe stalks.” “Angie, you’re sure a weird Boston bean.”

On the sides of my pumper truck in their special brackets were positioned lengths of suction hose of very thick-walled rubber and fabric laminate construction. One or two or three, threaded end to end, would usually suffice to reach and connect to a fire hydrant. They were quickly connected together by captive, heavy brass spin-couplings. With all of them joined or even more added, it allowed us, parked at a curb, to suck up someone’s back yard swimming pool. In the same way we could take advantage of a convenient creek, canal or irrigation system to attempt protecting rural property. Well, where we *did* run into the Press was on the rural drill. We had driven a good fifteen minutes to an old bridge (low parapet, masonry), crossing a small creek out in citrus land. It was a ‘two lane’ and we parked center span in ours. That big, bright red fire truck perched on the bridge, stream flowing underneath, with a backdrop of colorful maples, I must say was an impressive setting. The creek was languidly running ten feet below the roads surface.

Suction hose is very stiff for a good reason: to resist collapsing. Several lengths or more screwed together *starts* to show some forgiveness. To reach the *optimum* pick up point in the stream below was going to require all the lengths we carried.

My hunch was right! The press photog showed up within ten minutes of our arrival. *First* the Chief, Assistant Chief, and Captain Voght, for another ten minutes, led him around. Then *he* led them around for an additional ten. Following those meetings of the minds the shutterbug set-up on the bank of the stream below at his chosen spot to capture the silver haired Chief instructing ‘his men’ in front of all that gleaming brass and red enamel in a persimmon haze. Beefy, polished brass fittings hosting sections of black suction hose, arching up to the “Red Leviathan”, in turn spewing a high-pressure column of water out her top mounted, rotary, polished-brass water canon made a fine exposure. But it was not without hitches. During the pounding heat of full summer when the truck might serve a “Smoke Check” among scarce eyeballs in the deep rural, canned refreshments, in ice, were known (by a small clique not that of the chiefs and officers), to sometimes reside in the least employed (upper left), length of suction hose. In late September Angie had clued me in. Regrettably I was never on duty when the bar was open. Were brew ski’s still in that hose? If so it translated: “Oh man. This ain’t going to be funny. Oooh Weee. Wish I wuzn’t here.”

What now ran through me (and others witnessing), was something somewhere between unease and panic. *Every* length of ‘suction’ would be required. Many eye balls were now tossing a hot potato. I don’t know *how* many of the gathered knew the true status of the last section. Was it a host now? When at last called for, I was beside myself. “Oh Boy! It’s gonna hit the fan.” There was the Chief, in his finest plumage, giving the order to install the strainer/check valve. After a hyper pregnant second or two, the end plug was removed and (where it should have been a dry tube), the hose spewed its liquid borne contents onto the pavement to everyone's horror.

Poor paparazzi, *so* challenged to maintain his composure in such an impossibly embarrassing scenario--poor Chiefs, their ethics, professional pride trampled--the ‘silver bullets’ rained down. Grandpa Pete and kind were palms on foreheads. Ooooh. *Who* would train their gaze on the Chief now? In slow motion, some still moving cans showed amazing resistance to entropy as the verbal silence was usurped by a monotonous snoring of Mack diesel. The frosting? Insult upon injury: a nearby eves-dropping on-wing murder of crows delivered mocking witness.

I couldn’t resist. Our Leader's eyes were those of actor Peter Lorre. Wall nut sized orbs of shock embedded in gray flesh. I looked up to Angie and he was valiantly trying to suppress a grin. I think he knew all along the crux of the dilemma. The Chief looked down and met the gaze of the paparazzi. It was the latter who first showed signs of losing composure. A fought, silent chuckle began shaking his whole body. Then, it was eyes back to the Chief. His wrinkles reformed, and his color, ending a suspended animation, resurfaced and a look of steely determination reclaimed the moment. Like an alpine mountaineer side stepping an opening, death promising crevasse, the drill trudged on. The Chief did not surrender. Orders were barked. Jock and regular alike, afraid to surrender the safety of rote movement, did the drill--*after* clearing away (into the creek), the evidence and our intake. But, all knew treason had been committed and *someone* would pay. Only, Grandpa Pete could not help but hope that some of my species downstream found those floating mines of the brewer’s art.

## Party Doll

One of the drills for ambulance duty was a CPR exercise. (Grandpa Pete's first introduction to this maneuver was made in Boy Scouts so I already had a fairly good comprehension of the theory.) The shortcomings of practicing on another living person, done at efficacious effort levels, are severe discomforts to the one being practiced on. The sternum needs to be sufficiently depressed to apply pressure on the diaphragm which stimulates the heart while rhythmically, oxygen is blown into the lungs. The amount of physical effort

required to do these tasks differs tremendously within the public. A two hundred pound man and a ninety-pound girl present different challenges. In many cases where CPR is administered, in need, successfully, the patient may suffer bruising and sternum and rib fractures. A tolerable price for added longevity, no? But children with their 'plastic' bones require much less force to manipulate. Thankfully when I trained at The Department a mechanical teaching device had been invented to aid in instruction.

This is only rumor, what I'm going to say next. I remember being told by the Assistant Chief and my instructors what I'm going to tell you but they are no longer. I believe it was in Sweden. A young girl, died. Maybe an auto wreck? The parents were well-to-do. They wanted the death of their daughter to celebrate life by saving others. Now this gets unreal. A *mold* was made of this deceased young woman. And from it a very life like mannequin was produced. The freaky thing was how real she also *felt*. I remember going around to grammar and Jr. high schools and PTA meetings etc. with my instructor and doing demonstrations with 'her'. The audience would always suck in a breath because our doll was so life like. When you place the heel of your palm on someone's sternum and then place your other hand on top of your first, and then in a combination lean and shove motion deflect their sternum, how do you know if you applied too much or too little force? In the chest cavity of our doll were instruments which displayed on a remote panel the amount of force applied to the sternum, and how many liters of air were blown with your lips on her lips into the 'lungs'. I remember being so amazed at how much effort it *did* require to keep the needles 'in the green'. I don't know if this is bunk, but I was told the hair on our doll was also human hair. Like the rest of 'her' it sure looked and felt like it.

"Eh, Pedro." "Yeah Jose." (Jose R.) "Eh man, let's play a joke on The Olive." "Jose, are you try'n ta get me in dutch?" "Oh No Man! Not me, man." "Like hell." "Hey, no man. I was just thinking about all the fun we could have." "What's this fun you'z speak'n of?" "Remember all that BS he (Olive), was going on about how his next date was going to be a "slam-dunk?" "Yeah, so?" "He bombed! And he's trying to deny it." "Jose, if you looked like him you'd not have much joy in your life either." "Well, he's such an obnoxious bore." "What's your stichk? Lay it out." "Well, you know how drunk he gets Saturday nights." "Yeah?" "I was thinking if we put that doll you have access to in his bunk, what a blast it would be to be 'waiting-up' for him some night." "Jose, you're Diablo! Diablo I say. Diablo. But I love it! Oh *shit* do I love it. Yaa Sir Eee! Jose, we'z gonna do it!"

Jose was a cool Hispanic dude. His people were of modest means. For the sake of his many nephews and nieces, he was going to college to demonstrate the benefits of continued education. I went home with him one weekend to a very rural corner of Paso Robles. I really 'dug' it. His mama loved feeding me. I ate so much that all these little eyes just below table level would congregate around me and stare. Jose and I had a couple of classes together each semester. Well, we couldn't do this 'dirty deed' without bringing in Angie and Danny too



and some others, so we did. I could see that it was 'gonna' be a roar. The Olive left to "visit friends". It was early Saturday evening. We waited. Some of us went out ourselves, hoping to be back in time for the fun. Our doll was stored in a locker downstairs in the Study Room. I told 'the guyz' I'd go down and fetch her but be ready to "talk interference" if a Confederate regular showed. (Visalia was pro-Dixie.) With silent nodding heads of encouragement I made it to the top of the landing. Jose, with a huge grin on his face lead the way to Olive's pit. It was a bit too kinky for me to stay and watch Jose and Angie arranging 'her' in Olive's bunk, so I left them to their grunts and giggles. I went to the TV room. My compatriots joined me in time and we ate popcorn while watching an old black and white movie. About 1:00 A.M. we heard it. The Olive's p.o.s. pickup truck parking in the lot. Immediately the TV and lights were killed. We sat in the dark listening to each other crunch popcorn. By the length of time it took Olive to get out of his cab we knew victory was ours. He stumbled in the back door and wobbled to the stairs. We could hear his slow motion "clung, clung, clung" on the circular iron stairway. At the top when the spring loaded door banged we swiftly and quietly as possible made for and up the stairs ourselves.

Our barracks hallways were lighted by bare, low-hanging, low-wattage incandescent bulbs. During dark hours it made for sufficient but easy on the eye illumination. Big windows, daytime, provided plenty of light. The Olive was in his cell, still fumbling around in the dark getting undressed. The hall was now lined with smiles in the dim. "Unnh, whahhh, whunh? Ohhhh Baaaabe." Jose had been mucho mucho Diablo. Unbeknownst to me he had applied a generous layer of lip stick to 'her' lips and when the lights were suddenly flipped on in his room poor Olive was branded like the occasional Congressman caught entertaining strippers in their Washington Office. The hallway immediately burst with a roaring chorus of laughter. The Olive turned many colors the next few days.

## Hallowed Mean

Halloween in Tulare County was an obsession for her youth. For police and fire departments it was a nervous sitting of the watch. This particular Halloween, for me, was an introduction to the rite of 'melon sides' and outhouse shenanigans. Since I was probably eight years old I had heard tales of such events as out house pranks but as CFD I witnessed both for the first time. On the run up to Halloween the Assistant Chief also (more than once), briefed us jock men on his fears. He wanted us to prepare for a busy shift, but he also wanted to ensure that *none* of the imminent victims of prankster-ism, of any type, on *either side* of the equation, hailed from VFD. It was then of great embarrassment that he later learned that at least two of his jock men were

*supposedly* observed in a mean stunt, involving an elderly, retired sheriff. It was the closest I had come, to date, of getting in serious trouble by being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

James had a real snazzy rig. Lots and lots of money in custom restoration and paint. It was an orange/yellow '40 Ford one-ton truck with black and red striping and faultless grille. It had been chopped and lowered and shortened and gilded. The big, exterior, chrome plated dual exhaust rose up at cab corners before quartering. It was a 'short bed flat' as I rode in it at the time. James was a home town guy, a product of multi-generation local orchard/ag interests. His family had lots of mojo. Contrary to type James was fairly liberal though mischievous he still be. The fact he and I had pulled passes for that evenings shift I fig'd was a result of the mojo. But he and I almost let his clan down, *terribly*, this night. If we'd been caught it would have been far worse than awful. Part of the fun of Halloween night in Citralia for a lotta years had been the 'melon-sides'. Young bucks would cruise about the city in pickups and flatbeds loaded with over ripe fruit and produce. Many of these combatants were ag stock themselves, so they had unlimited supply of ammo. The trick was to engage competition on a block without police scrutiny and do broadsides. Farm boys from every corner of the county invaded Citralia for the event. Of course there were long standing personal grievances in play and as to who fired on whom when and how. It was a great rivalry. Block after block around the downtown area were raincoat clad contestants riding in trucks waiting for the signal to start bombardment with their mostly putrid organic projectiles.

Of course beer played a role in these annual rites. We weren't foolish enough to carry the stuff with us. Maybe after a late afternoon brew ski fueled barbecue some stashes would be cached at secrete spots within the battle areas, and then contestants boarded their mounts and the fun began. It was an excitement akin to a sailboat crew awaiting the gun for a big, opening-season regatta. The sidewalks were full of partying young people. Many of the Hispanic 'low riders' were a good show. Among them were some amazing examples of exotic paint schemes and custom body work. The Dairy Queen and other youth oriented sweet tooth purveyors always did a land office business to boot. So did the half-dozen coin-op car washes. There was an excitement in the air because of an innate fear things could go badly wrong, like a bull fight, at any moment, and unfortunately this year it *did*.

James was wheel; Grandpa Pete was sandwich and Angie was shotgun. We were on our maybe tenth broadside against rovers from Exeter. As vehicles passed each other, crews aboard each would try to lob as much rotten produce on the other vehicle and inhabitants as possible. And I mean rotten. There were a lot of amateur food chemists trying to concoct the most foul aromas possible with the most repugnant viscosities achievable. Usually, after a couple or more engagements the fuzz on the prow would invariably close in and we'd lay low for a while as others drew focus. It was grand fun. Because of caution for paint jobs the auto car

washes had long, idling lines of 'plastered' vehicles. There never was a Halloween in Citralia (I was told), that did not include at least some minor collateral damage. Little did Grandpa Pete know he'd play a part, this season, in *the* jack pot event. After several hours of great fun and en-route to a final rinse-off we were ready to call it a night and were just one in many in a slow caravan of combatants leaving the battlefield. It was bumper to bumper about five blocks from the fire house. As we were passing by a pub, some Dinuba rovers in a parked flatbed lobbed a real stink load on us. One almost cleared the open shot gun window. Angie took some good flak and I did not escape totally. Our off guard crew on the rear returned fire. This is where tragedy struck. Danny, on the back, made a valiant effort to send a whole, 'engineered' water melon into the cab of the aggressor. Unfortunately its trajectory was a tad off course. I remember glimpsing the melon, like a fat, wingless, wobbling slow motion cruise missile lofting away from the truck, and whilst in flight, the doors of the pub were opening and an elderly gentleman was exiting. You guessed it. The melon flew right over the top of the intended target and slammed smack into the old guy at shoulder height. It took him down. What was especially upsetting was the fact that the old guy was on crutches.

Now just as this old buzzard went down there was a fender bender several cars up, in our lane, in mid-intersection. We now found ourselves in great panic. Our loyal crew on the back, our *buddies*, abandoned ship like *rats* and disappeared into the night. I can still hear Danny's loud parting laughter. Trying to back up the short distance to the following vehicle, and then get turned out and turned around, so close to the accident scene, while not colliding with oncoming traffic was going to be a real trick. Even worse, the old guy, now a mess, and directed by eye witnesses, was back on his sticks and making way directly for us. Angie quickly wound up the window before he reached us. With one of his crutches he started banging on the cab while in a tirade. Then he attempted to get the door opened. I had a very sick feeling in my stomach. With the imminent arrival of the police at the accident scene, I could just picture us all in the calaboose very shortly and the glowering chiefs adding to the ignominy. (Not to mention a personal injury suit?) How could it possibly get any worse than this? Well, it *did*.

The old guy suddenly, somehow, got the door ajar and he and Angie were in a tug-o-war. He was no match for Angie's strength, thankfully. The door was going nowhere. But neither was the old man. Then, like playing with a dog to get a rope from its mouth, Angie let go and the old man flew off like a napkin in the wind. He splayed out on his *back*, spread eagled, on the street! James then, miraculously, managed to wheel out into a u-turn and we were gone. Luckily, there were no witnesses who were willing to make *positive* ID. Reports quoted "a truck involved....." "It was covered in rotten".....(direct hits) ..... "with straw stuck all over." That fit the description of many vehicles parading that evening. But, someone said that at least two of the trucks occupants were rumored to be jock men. Thankfully it never developed into a 'line-up'. The cops did share our

property. They had their facilities adjacent to ours. We didn't mingle socially but were courteous to each other. The next several days to a couple of weeks were a time of suspenseful waiting.

As with every Halloween there were also the usual number of reported outhouse crimes. Some were set a fire, some turned over (owners within), some went missing. But no bad news showed up in the newspapers of a much more worrisome incident involving a retired sheriff. By Thanksgiving it was just a nuisance recollection and eventually, forgotten. James, we did not bring shame upon your tribe, after all. Congratulations!

## Smoke Checks

Smoke Checks were instances where firemen were required to hunt for the source of a smoke complaint. It was not a full blown alarm. Usually it was a phone call or calls from *worried* citizens, rather than a 'break the glass' eye witness alarm. I know a good number were kitchen blazes started and put out by the morons responsible for them, mooting our protective efforts. Depending upon how long our equipment had sat since prior activation, the frequency and amount of time spent on smoke checks also depended a lot upon the season and national sports. If it was between important games, and well before or a little after dinner, and fair, pleasant weather, we might drive around just for the pleasure of being out and about. The biggest potential danger to the community, I discovered later on, was a grain elevator/silo operation on the east side of town. Don't buy a house near a grain elevator! The inherent explosive danger due to dust ranked it right up with a munitions factory. So when meteorologically blessed (when wrestling cabin fever), it was always good PR to head over to the silo or way out to the quarry and remind the citizenry what their tax dollars looked like. After crossing the train tracks bordering the silo the going was much slower due to pot holes and very rough surfaces. Once, when these conditions were engaged at an excessive speed yours truly was ejected off the stern because of a loose grip on the overhead bar. Because I was agile and tough (then), I landed well and walked back to my now idling, relieved, laughing buddies. It was on these excursions that I developed my theory of where such municipal types of fire trucks should not be depended upon. Certainly not on Evans Bar. (Me And Everett)

Citralia Fire Department shared a distinction not unheard of in other outfits all over the country, and I'll bet, the world. I remember big, Teddy Bear Bud showing me some old photographs of an earlier CFD. Two were framed. One image was of a handsome, I think clinker brick, fire barn with second story accommodations. I sensed it had been taken soon after its completion. The other photo was the same building, but it looked like a bomb had been dropped on it. In white ink, scribbled near the bottom margins, were the day, month and year of each exposure, dates I don't remember now. While some of my earlier brethren were away putting out a fire their own station burned. Total loss. Why? Someone left the stove on when the emergency call came in. It must

have been at meal time. Before my tenure was up I found out personally how easy that was to do. The alarm sounds and you are instantaneously operating in a totally different, auto pilot mode. It would'a been a couple of beautiful rib-eyes too.

In closing Grandpa Pete's Citralia Fire Department memoir, I would like to say a few words about two co-workers. Bud Hasslet, the big Teddy Bear, was the most amiable guy I'd ever met. He was a long time employee, a regular, and a former professional baseball player. He drove my assigned truck. A bear of a man he was. Myself, I'm not a baseball fan like my Home Made Cafe friends Norm and Janet and Collin. But while in Berkeley visiting, I'll happily sit and watch along with them on their wide screens, sip'n'- nibbl'n all of their wondrous fare. Denny Smithson, my old friend from KPFA Radio and Cody's Books, had charter Oakland A's season tickets *right* behind home plate. He took me to a game once. It *was* lots of fun. Not the game so much, but the *spectacle*--and I could read the laundry tags on butt pockets. Now Norm and Janet, or Denny or Collin could tell you what team Yogi Berra played on. (I could tickle Google but I won't.) Well, Bud was stuck behind Yogi, at the number two catcher's spot, and signed to a terribly long contract to keep him off competing teams. Demoralized, he left it all behind. It was Bud who tossed the dimes into the frying skillets of wild picked mushrooms, claiming: "Pete. No worries my man. If the dime turns green, we toss the whole batch." I wonder where that superstition hails from? I could visualize it though as a "Flakey-Wakey" restaurant sketch with Jackie Gleason and Art Carney. But, if I wanted the straight poop on any firehouse/fireman/Citralia related topic, I'd seek out Bud. Friendly, insightful and a straight-shooter he was. But like another gentleman who I will introduce next, Bud, had, in-tow, a sense of 'short changed' destiny lingering about.

Jose

The second person of interest, Jose R., was one of the few jock men who were not jocks. 'Moto Wayne' was another. I think they were two out of a dozen. I always wished that I had made more than just that one trip home with Jose to Paso Robles. I very much enjoyed him and on that one trip, his family. Their standard of living and what I was accustomed to were different worlds. His neighborhood was not one I'd have gone in search for Horatio Alger success stories. Was it perhaps my early introduction to economic 'realities'? ('You've got a rude awakening coming.') Jose's home lot hosted a number of parked vehicles in various stages of road worthiness and a few runabouts of dubious sea worthiness. His dad, a teamster, also had two *questionable* highway tractors parked there also. Aside from siblings, I sensed extended family members also made up the household; and, mealtime was a very felicitous event. The weekend I visited his family was cooking a cow's head in the ground. A deep hole had been dug near the house days before and a big fire of hardwoods started.

Timed to a science, the coals were raked into the hole and the head, having been brined and spiced, was wrapped in many layers of banana leaves and wet burlap and placed in the hole. The loose earth was then shoved back into the hole and it was ‘forgotten about’ until ready. Me and food. Sometimes the timing couldn’t be better. That night’s feast was a new experience and a most enjoyable one. After which the men folk hung-out to smoke and joke and las señoritas toiled in clean up. By all the shrieks and laughter they were making it sure seemed like they were having fun. Maybe I was the brunt of some friendly joking, no? Anyway, Jose, speak’n a mile a second to his family excused himself and Grandpa Pete, winked at me, and motioned towards his car. “Eh Pedro, let’s go have some fun.”

Jose owned a great *low rider*. It was a *fast back* 1951 Chevy coupe, pearlized silver and sporting a visor and polished moons. It even had the lighted hood ornament and lighted fender wells, and, oh yeah, the chromed chain steering wheel, plastic Jesus and fuzzy dice. After not more than fifteen minutes of cruising down unpaved lanes, we were in the real boonies. I had no idea where I was. It was a flat landscape with a grouping of tall, rich green (in the headlights), every so often, signifying human habitation. Palms and tamarisk and cane encircling el pueblo. No street lights. Finally we were slowing down and headed for one of these large clumps of enclosed wind break. The closer we got I could see we weren’t alone in the endeavor. The nights ‘tall rich green’ soon resembled a flowers center, with a ring of car body petals. Unlike Jose’s dwarfed family collection, these were all still warm. After parking: “Pedro, you’re gonna have lots of fun.” I was hopeful he’d prove correct. But, I will admit that I had begun to sense how far out of my element I was. (Not until I found myself a lone ‘Joe’ out in the Philippine jungle attending cock fights, riding on the back of Benji’s motor scooter (Manila Diary) did I feel more vulnerable.)

I could smell ‘cigarillos’, those special, little, short ‘cheroots’, and also saw some electric light filtering through the dense living hedge we were approaching. This one was a mixture of fiendishly barbed cacti, pampas grass and cane. Two *gentlemen* were standing, one either side of a path leading into the compound within. We approached slowly, their six eyeballs doing a lazy to and fro. Everyone remained on guard. Jose approached and broached the silence. Then, in low voices, I heard the word ‘gringo’ in the conversation. No doubt who that meant. A few seconds later we were good to go. Jose gave me a nod as he started for the opening. That ‘hedge’ was a good ten feet thick. The last words in English that I heard for the next four hours, as we tread the gap, were from Jose: “Stick close.” That evening was my introduction to cock fighting and barrio garage cabaret. By the gleaming eyes, laugh lines and levels of laughter, there also was *no* question that I was the subject of some great joking. It was fine fun! But I was heartened when we eventually pulled back into Jose’s driveway in the wee hours. Almost two decades later (Talbot Street years with Kay), I picked up a copy of the National Geographic and thumbing through it I saw Jose’s name and picture. He was an emaciated, sick man, under

forty, near death. His dream, to be a good example for his younger kin folk, somewhere, had gone terribly wrong.

Hind sight can be torture. Grandpa Pete sometimes wondered if he 'should'a' stayed in Citralia with the fire department, and retired at 48. ("Just show the badge.") In those days, securing and functioning in a fireman's job wasn't the political football it later became. And, it was common for off-duty firemen to also be barbers, upholsterers, carpenters etc. etc. I heard it said: "Firemen had the best pickups and the finest runabouts" (recreational boats). But, that didn't happen with/to me. I was not impressed with the college and I left in the spring. Yours Truly certainly did enjoy though, the company of my fellow firemen: listening to and sharing experiences, riding motorcycles in Kings Canyon, our smoke checks, wild mushroom hunts/feasts, the inner tube floating beer festivals on the river, and especially the Noble's. Then, that great, wild, Halloween. Well, I also love my four children and grands so much that I couldn't imagine a life without them, and it wouldn't have been what is, if I had stayed. In the end, no complaints.

Oh, remember: heat + fuel + oxygen; and, take good care of your high quality, rubber garden hoses, with nozzles.

Grandpa Pete