

The Love Bug and I

I've already mentioned some of my adventures while employed by the Sierra Power Company as a patrolman. My cousin Lester Filosena and I took a job with the same power company in the summer of 1920, as caretakers at Gem Lake.

This lake is at an elevation of 10,000 feet in the Minaret wilderness. You reach it by a steep, primitive tramway, or by a narrow trail, suitable only for foot or horseback. This trail originated at the Silver Lake¹ power plant.

Our job was to control the flow of water through the dams located at Gem and Agnew Lakes. These dams collected run-off water from other lakes and streams in the high country, such as Garnet, Ediza, Thousand Islands, and Waugh. We regulated the valves controlling the amount of water to the power plant below, where it was used to generate electricity for Mono Basin.

We kept the electric lines up, and the telephone line in operation. I reported weather conditions and the current water level at 9:00 a.m. daily, when I'd receive our orders for the day.

In the late fall, Lester and two others who had been working there resigned. They didn't want to be isolated during the long winter months, where the only mode of travel out in winter was by way of snowshoes.

Mr. Watts, my boss, told me that if I would stay, I could hire a friend. I knew just the person: Sky Arribalsage. He was a Spaniard who was living at Jack Hammond's place. Sky asked about the job and its duties.

"Doing nothing, mostly," I said, "just keeping me company."

"I've been looking for a job like that all my life. I'll take it!" he said. "When do I start?"

I said, "Today!"

With that settled, Sky and I started out for Gem Lake.

After some time at the lake, we became bored with so little to do; so

we set out a trap line and during the winter we trapped 20 marten and a fox. I was anxious to save up a little grub stake, as I hoped to go to Oklahoma in the spring to see J.B. again.

The winter was uneventful; and in the spring Sky returned to Hammond's, while I took the train out of Carson City to El Reno. J.B. was waiting for me.

In El Reno I found work after a few days on the line crew for the telephone company. I became friendly with a young crew member who soon left for Alaska. Before he did, he gave me the address of a girl named Betty (Elizabeth) Oakwood, whom he had met while in Tyrone, Pennsylvania. She had some young brothers and sisters and a dog named Rags. I've always had a soft spot for dogs, you know, and I began writing to Betty. She liked my letters and I liked hers. We exchanged pictures, and I could see she looked like a winner. I decided to go to Pennsylvania to meet her.

Betty was as pretty as her picture. Prettier, in fact! So I stayed. In

Tyrone I got a job on the telephone crew, and we would meet while I was out working. The love bug had bitten me — HARD!

The only drawback was her parents. They had not met many westerners, did not know my family background or my intentions; and they refused to let us establish any kind of relationship. (That's why we met while I worked.) Naturally, this made us all the more determined to see each other. One of her relatives was affiliated with the "Klan," and I heard rumors that I might be escorted out of town — forcibly. I didn't relish the prospect, so I went back to El Reno to let things cool off. I visited with J.B. and waited for word from Betty.

I was on cloud nine when I finally got a letter from her saying, "Come back and we'll talk things over." I told my father I was going to get married if things could be worked out. He loaned me \$400.00, gave me his blessings and waved lovesick me off. Once more, I headed for Pennsylvania.

I was sorry to learn that Betty's parents hadn't changed their mind about our relationship. There was no other course but to take matters into our own hands, so to speak.

Betty's parents thought that we might elope in the middle of the night. I surprised them and whisked her away at high noon!! Nobody saw us!!

The date was Saturday, May 27, 1922. The old taxi driver who picked us up in Tyrone told us we would have to travel fast, as we had to cross the border into Cumberland, Maryland, where the courthouse was only open until one. Betty was only 17, which was the legal age in Maryland, but not in Pennsylvania.

We got our license, then stopped at a jeweler's where I bought Betty a gold wedding ring. From there it was on to the Methodist church, where a crippled old minister married us. His wife, Ada, was our witness. Their name, I remember, was Childress.

The taxi driver took us to his own home, where he rented out rooms. We stayed there two days while we looked for an apartment.

Our wedding supper, at a small restaurant, was ham and sweet potatoes (still one of our favorites); and we were in high spirits.

We found a tiny "love nest," and every day I looked in vain for work. Ten days passed, and our money ran pretty low. Betty said, "Let's go home. Maybe things will be better now."

At Tyrone, we rode the street car out to the Oakwood's house on the hill. Betty's mother, Bess, came to the door. Her husband, Frank, whose word was law, had left strict orders that I should never set foot inside

their door. Bess reluctantly turned me away, permitting Betty to remain and visit. Before I returned to town, I told Betty to come to the Arlington Towers Hotel when she was ready to go home.

It was very late in the evening and I was very nervous. I was greatly relieved when I finally saw my bride at the door.

We spent the night there, returning to Cumberland the next day, disappointed that there was nothing for us in Tyrone.

Our financial situation became desperate. I remembered that my friend Sky had told me to write him if I ever needed anything. I figured this was the time, so I wrote, asking for \$160.00 to tide us over.

In the meantime, a large woman named Kate agreed to give us \$30 to \$40 credit at her grocery store. Betty and I enjoyed shopping for "White Goose" coffee and other staples.

At one point, we didn't even have enough money for a postage stamp, and we were literally "living on love."

I haunted the post office for the check from Sky, and were we ever upset when we finally went to the bank to cash it. They had lost it!

I had to write Sky to issue a new one; and by now Betty and I were *really* in a pickle! We owed money for rent, as well as groceries.

One morning, before I was out of bed, there was a knock at the door, and a man called out, "Is your name George La Braque?"

I answered, "Yes," and let the man in.

He said, "We have a job for you as a laborer where you registered for work at the Kelly Springfield Tire Company. The wages are 30¢ per hour, 12 hours a day, 15 minutes for lunch. Want to take it?"

"You bet!!" I answered. I reported for work the next morning. After learning the trade, I stepped up to doing "piece work," at which time I made six or seven dollars a day.

The working conditions were unbearable. I got run down and sick from the long hours and back-breaking work. Betty's newly married cousin, Liz Deome, and her husband Fred came to visit us. They talked us into moving in with them and their parents in the neighboring town of Irwin. Fred helped me get a job at the Vacuum Tire Company making tires. Soon we were able to move into a place of our own. It had a huge grapevine on one side. This was not a bit too soon, as we now had a baby on the way.

Two months before the baby was due, Betty woke me at daylight, insisting the baby was coming. She told me to call Dr. Smith, her doctor, right away.

Dr. Smith was eating breakfast, and seemed vague as to who we

were. Nevertheless, I hurriedly gave him directions, and he said he would be right over. I flew upstairs and told the landlady that Betty needed help while I phoned to tell my boss that I would not be in to work.

When I returned to the house, I was stunned to find that the landlady, who happened to be a midwife, had helped Betty deliver a five-pound baby girl. We named her Lily.

When Dr. Smith arrived soon afterward, I saw why he hadn't known us: he was an entirely different Dr. Smith! Nevertheless, he looked things over and pronounced mother and baby doing "fine." Then he returned to his meal.

We had planned to buy baby clothes on the next payday; so Lily had literally "not a stitch to wear." Betty handed me our last two dollars, and instructed me to buy some baby clothes — pronto! I rushed to the nearest store and made a purchase. I arrived home, breathless but proud, and handed Betty a long, lacy Christening dress — nothing more! Betty sure was upset. Lily, however, did fine, wrapped in petticoats and tucked into a shoebox bed.

A year or two later, we moved to a house in Jeanette, down on the river bank. It was owned by an old Polish couple who kept ducks and chickens. No children were allowed there; but after Lily climbed onto the husband's lap, we were allowed to stay.

One rainy Sunday, I said to Betty, "Let's go to the auction today." This we did, and while there I bought a gold watch. It had rained hard all day, and that evening, as we undressed by the fireplace, we noticed water pouring in under the door. Alarmed, I said, "I wonder what the hell is going on?"

I was shocked as I realized it was a flood. Even worse, our house was at the river's edge. I shouted, "Gather up a few things, while I get the chickens (we had 14 of our own), and we'll get the heck out.

"The heck with the chickens," Betty argued.

"No sir," I insisted, "I'm going to save those chickens."

Outside, I grabbed the chickens by the legs and threw them inside the house, where they immediately flew upstairs. By the time we left the house, the water was up to my waist. My heart was in my throat as I clutched my wife and baby tightly to my chest, wading in terror through the raging waters toward higher ground. There we found many other fleeing families.

We were shivering and soaking wet, as we made our way to the train station to find shelter. Others had had the same idea; and it was so crowded that we couldn't even sit down. In desperation, I said to Betty, "Let's get on a train and go somewhere." I went to the ticket agent and asked when the next train was due.

He asked, "Where to?"

"I don't give a hoot!" I replied. "Just so we get out of here." We boarded the next train and rode to the end of the line. Then we got off and caught the next train back.

It was dawn when we arrived back in Jeanette. Some good news and some bad news were waiting for us.

The river had subsided, but we faced a terrible job of cleaning up six inches of mud and silt on the floor of our house. In despair, Betty pleaded with me to move; but our finances would not allow this, so the mop-up began.

The only thing to crow about was the chicken situation. They had roosted on the curtain rods and the piano, and not one had been lost.

During the next three years (1924-27) we saved enough money to buy a used Model T. Soon afterward, unfortunately, a stike at the tire plant left me unemployed. The Great Depression was shaping up, and jobs were very scarce.

As our money cup ran low, I was lucky to find work at a nearby glass factory hauling glass to the cutter's with an electric cart.

Conditions at the plant were bad, as usual, but I was shocked to see how badly the Negroes were treated. The work was very hard, and there

were huge rats to deal with. One night, as I was eating my supper, a gigantic rat tried to steal my food. It bit me on the leg when I did not cooperate.

This was too much for me. I said to Betty, "We are going to California! Back to Mono Lake!"

The idea of returning to Mono Lake had been brewing in my mind. Only a few days earlier, the Sierra Power Company had sent me a telegram offering me a job as an operator at the Silver Lake plant. The salary was \$125.00 per month, plus housing and utilities, too good an offer to pass up.

It was 1927. Betty was reluctant to leave her family; but I was determined to take the job.

In preparation, we sold our furniture, packed our belongings, and made some adjustments on the Model T. As for the chickens, they didn't fare as well this time, ending up in our stew pot.

In May, with spirits high, we headed back to Mono Basin.

At that time, except for one small stretch, there were no paved roads. When it rained for any length of time, the roads were deep ruts of solid mud. Impassable.

In Iowa we stopped to camp one evening and Lily, now four, reached out to pet a dog. It bit her clear through the skin above the eyebrow, and

she still has the scar. The blood flowed heavily, and Betty and I were very upset. A little old lady doctored her with mercurochrome, considered a cure-all in those days.

As luck would have it, because of the heavy rain we were stranded there for nine days, with only boiled potatoes and a little salt to eat. Finally, the sun came out and the mud dried up.

We resumed our journey, stopping next at the "Great Salt Lake." We rested there, swimming and floating in the briny waters.

It took us 21 days to reach Mono Basin. We stopped at Conway Summit, treating ourselves to hot apple pie at the roadside inn. (Although over 50 years have passed, their hot apple pie is still a favorite of mine.)

As we slowly made our way downward through the steep, hairpin curves, Betty got her first view of Mono Lake, with its islands and picturesque craters. She was enchanted to find her new home so beautiful.

About an hour later, we drove up to the Filosena ranch in a cloud of dust. I proudly introduced Grandmother Mary and Uncle George to my family.

My homecoming was marred by the news of George Joos' death the previous winter, as he tended his trap line near Gem Lake.

We moved into a house high on a hill at the Silver Lake plant, and I went to work as an oiler. We became good friends with the Carsons of Carson Camp. Betty and Lily often walked down the road to have tea there.

One day, when Betty and Lily returned from visiting the Carsons, they insisted it had rained small frogs; and indeed, Lily had some in a tin can. I still remain dubious, although I have heard of this phenomenon.

Later, we transferred to Mill Creek, only a mile and a half walk to the Filosena ranch (by footpath over the hill). Lily, who was five, was enrolled at the Mono Lake School (now the Keller residence).

That same winter Betty suffered a miscarriage. Her life was saved when Dr. Kelly of Bridgeport skied in several miles during a heavy blizzard to give her professional attention.

We moved to the Lee Vining Power plant, where two more children were born: a son, George, Jr., in January 1932, and another daughter, Donna Elizabeth, in 1937.

Uncle George came to live with us when the Filosena ranch was sold to the City of Los Angeles. He passed away in 1934.

If the truth were to be told, the conditions that prevailed during the winter of 1931-32, when my son was born, played a big part in changing the lives of Mono Basin inhabitants.