

Okies

My sophomore year in high school represented a turning point in my young life. My family unexpectedly relocated from the mountains of Southwest Virginia to the West Coast. I experienced discrimination for the first time because of my accent, the way that I dressed, and my Appalachian culture, but it would not be the last. I discovered a love of adventure that has been an important part of my life. I fell into a life of crime that could have ended my dreams before they started.

Men in the Swanson clan have a history of leaving their native lands and traveling great distances in search of a better life for themselves and their families. Peter Arthur Swanson, my Swedish grandfather to whom I owe my looks, my tenacity, and my life long entrepreneurial spirit, was born in Kalmar, Sweden in 1887. The family story was that he ran away from home at age thirteen at a time of great economic problems in Sweden and following a beating by his father. He stowed away on a cattle ship and made his way to America, landing around 1901 as an illegal immigrant. He later came back to America and entered legally. He started work in the timber industry, as was common in Sweden, first as a laborer and later as a timber cutter. He and the family traveled by train around Virginia and North Carolina to wherever the timber was located. My Dad, Emory Paul Swanson, the youngest of three children, was born in 1920.

The timber industry was known then, as it is today, as one of the most dangerous professions. Peter died in 1924 in Bacova, Virginia in Bath County of a fractured skull when a part of a tree that he had cut broke off in an adjacent tree and fell, fatally striking him. He was buried in the Mount Hope Cemetery next to a small one room church outside of town. Peter was a hard working and entrepreneurial business man. Our family has often wondered how our lives would have changed if the wind that dislodged the broken branch had blown the other direction away from our grandfather. I can see his face in the faces of my children and grandchildren from a family picture taken over a hundred years ago. I can feel his spirit in me.

My other grandfather, Jezreel Collins, had himself traveled by train to the State of Washington as a teenager. He had gone out in search of a job to escape the poverty and hard scrabble existence in Southwest Virginia. He later met someone who had offered to marry his younger sister Minnie in true “mail order bride” fashion. She refused to leave Virginia to travel to the State of Washington when her suitor sent a train ticket for her, but not her large dog! Jezreel later returned to Virginia where he spent most of the remainder of his life.

My Dad had grown up without a father during the Great Depression. He helped his grandpa, Johnny Sturgill, make moonshine starting when he was seven years old. He later worked in a saw mill. After he married my Mom in July, 1940, he followed the path that many working men did in Southwest Virginia and entered the coal mines. He worked mostly in non-union coal mines for the rest of his working life.

In those days, most of the non-union mines were owned by small independent coal operators. Federal and state mining laws were still in their infancy, and the miners worked in very difficult and unsafe conditions. Most of these small non-union mines were in “low coal” as low as 33” high which required miners to move around on their hands and knees. Dad’s first jobs involved loading coal with a pick and shovel into coal cars pulled by ponies. He was later promoted to a “shot man” that meant that he drilled the holes into the “face” of the coal seam and placed the dynamite into the holes to blast out the coal – a job that offered a little more money but a daily risk of dying.

The Summer of 1964 was a difficult time for our country and our family. President Kennedy had been assassinated a year earlier. Assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King would follow in the next 3-4 years. The Civil Rights Movement was causing great turmoil throughout the country – especially the deep South. The War in Viet Nam was looming on the horizon. My father was 44 years old. He had the early stages of Black Lung disease that eventually killed him.

By the early 1960's Mom's older sister and her family had moved to Washington State. My first cousins would visit their birthplace in Wise County each summer. When they stopped by the family farm, they would tell stories about spruce timber that was several feet in diameter, pulling large salmon out of the river, and miles of unspoiled wilderness with elk, deer, and bear. The Weyerhaeuser mill was always looking for new workers, and the pay was good. Dad was hooked.

On a hot July day, he came home from work, washed off the coal dust, and announced to the family that we were leaving our family farm and moving to the State of Washington! Since this was the only home that my sister, younger brothers, and I had ever known, this came as quite a shock. In retrospect, this was Dad's version of a mid life crisis. He saw this as his one opportunity to "get out of the mines", move his family out of poverty, and save his life.

In early August we loaded four kids in the back seat of Dad's red 1964 Chevy Impala along with Mom, Dad, and one of Dad's friends to help drive and headed west. Mom placed sheets to line the "trunk" of our Chevy Impala and packed as many clothes as she could into the space. That was all we took with us. We left on the trip, as was often the tradition for families in Appalachia, in the early evening to "avoid the traffic". We headed north into Kentucky on US 23, over the Kentucky Mountain Parkway, and across Kentucky.

These were the days before many of the interstate highways were built. Dad's friend assured us the planned route would allow us to avoid many of the big cities along the way. We drove all night. We began to groggily awake from a restless night of a few hours of sleep just as we were traveling through downtown St. Louis, Missouri. So much for the plan for missing the big cities! Looking up at the tall buildings hurt my neck.

Dawn came slowly to the flat countryside of Missouri, and clouds and fog rolled over the land as the sun struggled to make an appearance. I continued to peer out the back window of the '64 Chevy with an eerie feeling that something was missing. After a few uncertain minutes of anxiously searching the horizon, I finally realized what was troubling me. I exclaimed to my family "Where are the mountains? I can't see any mountains!" This was the first time that our family had been out of the mountains of Southwest Virginia, and I needed to see the mountains. There were none to be seen.

Our journey followed the route that became Interstate 70, but this was before Interstate 70 was built. Growing up in the mountains, we were shocked at the table top flatness of the State of Kansas. We would see a silo or a tree in the distance as we traveled through the fields of wheat and corn and think we were only a short distance away. About thirty minutes later we would pass the landmark that we had seen from 40 miles down the road.

From Denver, we drove north into the Rocky Mountains of Wyoming, crossed over a corner of Utah, and headed into Idaho. We crossed the Snake River Gorge and followed the wide Columbia River west in Oregon. Along the way, we passed through cities that I had only read about in books - places like Kansas City, MO, Abilene, KS, Denver, CO, Cheyenne, WY, Laramie, WY, and Pocatello, ID. These names had a mystical sound to them, and for four kids who had not been outside of Virginia, we were awe struck. It took almost a week to make the trip, stopping only a couple of nights in budget motels to rest. Exhausted, we finally headed north from Portland to our new home.

We arrived as the sun was setting over the Pacific Ocean in our new home in the small town of Raymond, Washington on the Willapa Bay – a logging town with a huge Weyerhaeuser mill where both my Dad and older brother eventually worked just across the bay. Raymond is located in Southwest Washington on what later became Highway 101 – the West Coast Highway. We stayed with relatives for the first couple of days until we could find a rental home. We rented a house on Water Street that backed up to the tidal flats across from the Weyerhaeuser mill. The tidal flats would flood at high tide. The house smelled "musty".

We were fascinated by the Japanese ships that docked across from our house while they loaded lumber bound for Japan. We would wave to the Japanese sailors, and they would wave back. Our forays into the tidal flats were not without risk. Skunks were everywhere. On one occasion, my two younger brothers and I were exploring the tidal flats. When we looked up, we were surrounded by skunks, all of them with their tails in the air and their “business ends” aimed toward us. Luckily, we made a break for it without ruining one of the few outfits of clothes that Mom brought from Virginia.

My Dad and my older brother, Lowell, both got jobs at the Weyerhaeuser mill as my cousins had predicted. Both of them worked on the large automated saws, dangerous work with lots of dust and fumes. The pay was good, and the hours were long. Dad was realizing his dream of getting out of the coal mines.

I enrolled in Raymond High School in town. The courses were a little different than I had left in Virginia. Tenth graders took Geometry vs. Algebra I. This was during the time of President Johnson’s national fitness initiative for high school students across the country. The Physical Education program was very demanding. Within a few weeks, we had to take the national fitness tests. I was able to do 45 pushups in a minute, run a mile with a “personal best” time, and climb the large ropes to the top of the gymnasium. I was in the best physical condition of my life. Later in Physical Education class, I was forced to wrestle a kid who was a district champion a year earlier, and I had never been in the ring. He beat my “butt”; I felt that the PE teacher had done that to embarrass me.

My sister, brothers, and I began to notice animosity toward us from our classmates. We only had a few outfits of clothes, and they looked pretty “raggedy”. Worse yet, there had been a long history of people on the West Coast of the US “looking down on” poorer people who had migrated from places like Oklahoma dating back to the Dust Bowl in the 1930’s in search of a better life. They were called Okies. Pretty soon, we heard this outdated label being applied to us. “Okies, Okies” we heard our classmates whisper on the playground or in the hallways, and it hurt.

The coast of Washington had all the beauty and grandeur that we had expected. Our first cousins had a large fishing net that they used to catch salmon as they made their way up the streams to spawn near our home. There was a small waterfall that was a great place to catch them. On one occasion, they brought a freshly caught salmon by our house. We placed it in the bathtub, and its head was at one end and its tail fin at the other in the 60" tub. Although the weather was mild near our house on the ocean, we drove back a few miles from our home at Thanksgiving, and probably a couple of thousand feet in elevation, and ran into a foot of snow. We often drove through herds of elk in the mountains. We could see snow capped Mount Rainier in the distance.

It didn't take long for my entrepreneurial spirit to show up. There were no blackberries to pick for sale like I had done in Virginia. Instead, my aunt, uncle and cousins picked ferns for sale to florist shops. Picking ferns required a small knife that was on a ring placed on your middle finger. After a little practice, I was able to learn how to select the right size of ferns on the forest floor, cut them to the right length, and hold them firmly in my left hand until the bundle could be tied with string to secure them. I think we were paid fifty cents per bundle or one cent per fern.

My cousins introduced me to the one job that they all pursued to make the "big money". It involved exploring the surrounding mountains to look for scrap cedar logs left behind after the logging companies had clear cut the area. The cedar logs were sawed into two foot long chunks and split into cedar shake boards that were two inches thick. The finished boards could be any where from four inches wide to maybe eighteen inches wide. We split the chunks of wood into boards using a sharp metal blade on a handle and a homemade hammer made by cutting down a maple tree and forming a handle. It was hard work, but the pay was very good. The boards were then transported to the shake mill, the load was measured, and we were paid in cash. We were paid fifty cents per board foot; a full load could bring \$300-400.

Later that fall, we moved from Water Street in town out to an area near my aunt in the Willapa River valley. We rented a house with a large lot and a garage. My older brother approached me about going into business to start cutting shakes. I bought a 1956 GMC pickup truck. It was dark blue with a rack to allow us to stack the shingles high. I was fifteen years old, too young to get a driver's license in Washington. My brother bought a Homelite chain saw with a 44" bar – I had never seen a chainsaw that big in Virginia. We were in business!

I had also never made this kind of "easy money" in Virginia, and the problem with easy money was that the lure, like a beautiful woman, became addicting. As the money got bigger, we started taking more and more risks. Instead of just cutting scrap cedar on clear cut areas, we started venturing into areas of the vast surrounding forests that stretched up into the mountains from our coastal town of Raymond. Somehow, my brother came into possession of a key to some of the gates that the logging companies locked to keep people out of areas that were actively being logged. We would venture into these areas, often at night, cut and load the blocks of cedar and hustle out of the area before we could be discovered, all the while watching for truck lights in the distance as our chainsaw roared through the cedar logs. We knew that we were trespassing on land where we didn't belong, but we didn't seem to care.

I had just turned sixteen. Life had set into an interesting rhythm. We would venture into the mountains for one or two nights early in the week and deliver the chunks of cedar to our garage. We would cut the chunks into shake boards and deliver them to the mill by Saturday and collect our money. I was living on four hours of sleep on some nights while never missing a day of school, all the time feeling like we were on a two person crime spree.

One of the highlights of the year was a class trip to Seattle. We went to a show, had a couple of nice meals, and toured the Space Needle that was built as part of the 1964 Seattle World's Fair. I was afraid of heights, and it was quite an experience. With the Pacific Northwest known for earthquakes, I looked forward anxiously to my return to the ground from the top of the Space Needle.

There are turning points in life – I came to call them “forks in the road”. Although I did not know it at the time, I was heading for a major turning point in my young life. I didn't understand the danger in the life that I was leading until one day I was called down to the principal's office at Raymond High School. I was greeted by two police officers from the Town of Raymond who questioned me about cutting cedar on company land and missing keys to locked gates. I felt a knot forming in my stomach, and my hands started to sweat. I “took the fifth” and offered no evidence of my guilt or that of my brother. That day served as a wake up call. I realized the risk that I was taking. My whole future was in jeopardy. I went home, told my brother that I was getting out of the cedar shake business, and sold my GMC pickup truck, never looking back.

A few days later, I had another couple of major events take place in my life. The grades for the third quarter grading period had just come out, and I made straight A's with a 4.0 average. The news of my accomplishment was published in the local newspaper. I had the highest grade point average in my class. My classmates couldn't deal with it! They agonized, “How could an Okie be smarter than all of us”? Their stereotype of me had been shattered!

Another event that occurred was that our Dad came to the conclusion that breathing the sawdust and fumes from the Weyerhaeuser mill was as bad as breathing the coal dust in Virginia. We waited until the snow had melted in The Rockies and left Washington for good to return to Virginia. The return trip was uneventful; we only got lost once when we drove into a rancher's property in Nebraska by mistake. I enrolled in school at Pound High School, completed my sophomore year, and set my sights on college.

I sadly looked back on our adventure in moving to the West Coast and later returning to Virginia as an end to my Dad's dream of a better life outside the coal mines. He was forced to retire eight years later at age 53 when he was carried out of the coal mines because he couldn't breathe. He never entered the coal mines again, and he never worked another day outside of gardening and picking apples on the family farm. He suffered from Black Lung Disease, or "coal miner's disease" as it was known in Appalachia, for the remainder of his life.

It could have been the end of my dreams. If my family had not returned to Virginia and ended my "life of crime", I have often wondered where I would have ended up. Would it have been jail vs. attending college? I had a distant cousin who died a couple of years later in a shoot out with police. Could I have suffered his fate?

I have valued this time on the West Coast for the remainder of my life. The rugged beauty of the Pacific Northwest is unlike any other part of the country. Once you have lived there, it sort of gets in your blood. The Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia have a different kind of quiet beauty. The Pacific Northwest is unique, and I miss my time there even after all these years.

I took a side trip through the Town of Raymond thirty years later while in Washington State on a business trip. Our old house on Water Street had been demolished when they built the new bridge for Highway 101 – the Pacific Coast Highway. My old high school was closed, a victim of school consolidation. My brief time in Washington was the first time that I felt any form of discrimination because of my accent, the way I dressed, or my Appalachian culture. It would not be the last. My experience in Washington opened my eyes to the world beyond Wise County, and it launched my life long journey that took me to all (50) states and around the world.