

A Ride Of A Lifetime



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PROLOGUE: PERFECT

Everyone has a story. Sometimes, challenges arise when we are very young and, if our lives are about rising up to meet and overcome them, then some stories are more compelling than others. This is how I feel about my story.

When my father took on a new life, a second chance at life, his four girls were a big part of that. I want to show their families, and you, just how wonderful that ride truly was.

1

A NEW LIFE

My father, Melvin T. Cook, was born October 2, 1903 and was raised in Albany, Oregon, which, as of 2021, is the eleventh-largest city in Oregon. After graduating college, he worked his way up the company's ladder and soon became a Shell Oil executive. Married for more than ten years, he and his wife had a single daughter. They named her Patsy, and she was my eldest sister.

When Dad moved to Bellingham, Washington, there was a lot of back-and-forth over the years visiting my father's parents in Albany. He was their only child and, while growing up, his parents were self-employed, owning a block full of stores which included a gas station, car repair shop, grocery store, and laundromat. On the side street behind the grocery store was their home, a three-story abode which included a basement, main floor, and upstairs. Down the street about a block away was a school and a church. Across the street, there was a train track which rode past my grandparents' house, the school, and the church.

Whenever we visited, my twin sister, Polly, and I slept on the second floor. I remember how the train would pass by in the middle of the night, causing our beds to shake viciously, and we would hold onto each other for dear life until it eventually passed. I also remember my grandparents' walnut trees and watching how Grandpa Cook would dry them on big screens in their basement, meaning we always had lots of walnuts to crack for our mother at Christmas time. This chore proved to be quite the treat, however, as she always let us munch on walnuts!

Dad's side of the family has been documented in history books, as they were one of the first settlers in the Dalles, which was the end of the overland Oregon Trail. The Oregon Trail was roughly 2,000 miles, its route traveling from Independence, Missouri, to Oregon City, which was used by hundreds of thousands of American pioneers in the mid-1800s. Later, in 1884, the Union Pacific constructed a railway along that route. Our families meet the second week in August each year at a camping site near the Dalles to celebrate our history. The Dalles were also a major trade center for Native Americans for many years.

My great-great-grandfather led people along the Oregon Trail in the 1800s. Grandma Cook once gave me a list, which her brother acquired, that was given to settlers on the Oregon Trail. The list detailed what they were allowed to bring with them on their wagons. She also recounted a story of how some of our close family members were taken

by Native Americans into Canada and were never seen again.

My grandfather was named William Mansfield Cook, and he was one of eight children. My grandmother's name was Jennie Blackaby, and she had one sibling, her brother, Roy. I have a lot of fond memories of spending much of my childhood fishing and camping in places like Eastern Washington and Canada. These family vacations happened during my parents' time away from work, usually in late September or early October, and we were taken out of school for two to three weeks, though we still brought along our homework and learning materials.

My grandparents (on both sides) and parents loved camping, fishing, and fly fishing; they even wrapped their own flies. I remember Dad carrying a tin box whenever he went fishing. As I grew older, *A River Ran Through It*, starring Brad Pitt, quickly became a favorite movie of mine because it brought back wonderful memories of the days when I went fly fishing with my family. The first time I saw that movie I even cried while thinking about that specific time in my life. My son, realizing how important the movie was to me, bought me a copy for Mother's Day. I watch it at least once a year.

Though I loved fly fishing, I did not like fishing from a boat out on a lake. "You have to be quiet," Dad always said, "Or the fish will not come up to bite." Polly, on the other hand, loved to boat fish. One time, I was so frustrated

with having to stay quiet for so long, I tossed my brand-new fishing pole in the lake. Dad retrieved it but he was not happy, resulting in a punishment later on that day.

So, instead, Mom and I steamed fish a lot while Dad, Polly, and other family members would fish from the boat. Everywhere we camped there was either a lake or stream nearby. There is nothing better to eat than trout! Except for maybe salmon; I love salmon, too!

In the late 1930s, my father's second adventure in life began in Bellingham, Washington.

He built the first-ever Triple XXX Barrel Restaurant on Dupont Street in Bellingham. Over the years, many more popped up and are still around today. They served a wonderful root beer flavor you cannot find anywhere else. The establishment was a new way for families to enjoy themselves, and Dad did quite well on this new adventure. He loved the Bellingham area very much and made plenty of new friends. One of them, Bob Pratt, took him out to Birch Bay, about 30 minutes north of Bellingham, which resulted in the second Triple XXX Barrel drive-in opening in Birch Bay around the late 1930s. At this time, my dad was introduced to Bob's sister and my mom, Laura Pratt.

Mother's parents, Fay Sumner Pratt and Pauline Kathern Goodwin Pratt, lived their entire married life (50 years) near Blaine, Washington. Grandma Pauline had one brother, Clint Goodwin. They were raised in Wrangell, Alaska, where their parents were owners of a lumber mill.

Wrangell has the most unusual history. It is the third-oldest community in Alaska and the second oldest community in the southeast corner of the state. It's also the only city in Alaska to be ruled by four nations and under three flags: Russia, England, and the United States. Between 1950 and 1957, I stayed with my grandparents a lot, and Grandma Pauline would talk about those times at Wrangell and her childhood. She said she and her brother, Clint, were the only white children in that area and were sent on a boat to Seattle, Washington, where they stayed with their mom's cousin to finish school. This cousin owned a dress shop up on Queen Anne Hill called Queenies.

Great-uncle Clint worked as an engineer and Grandma Pauline was a teacher. Clint worked and lived all his life in Seattle. Grandma married, had nine children, and never taught school again because she had her hands full raising her children. Grandpa Pratt was from a family of four children. Over the years, Grandma's cousin who lived in Seattle would measure her children and supply their clothes, so they were dressed well while attending school. Clint would also supply money for beef. Grandpa had a big garden, two milk cows, and his parents raised 1,000 chickens each year at Haney (near Blaine) for their livelihood. Grandma canned any chickens that were given to the family. This helped immensely during the Great Depression as they ate well and had nice clothes for school. But they still carried their shoes to the bus stop in order to make them last longer.

Grandma and Grandpa Pratt lived in a home that belonged to the Alaska Packers. Grandpa worked at their canary most of his adult life, keeping the boilers working to cook the fish. Later, he was their night watchman at the top of the hill going down to the cannery.

From 1950 to 1957, Polly, Jill (my older sister), and I stayed with them three weeks in the spring and three weeks in the fall because of school. I remember Grandpa arriving for breakfast in cream-colored khakis. He would eat with us, then sleep while we were in school. Over the years, my grandparents were a big help to our parents. In appreciation, Dad saw to it that they had all their needs taken care of.

Dad also helped Mom's brother, Bob. My uncle opened the first skating rink in Birch Bay on land that my dad leased. It was an outdoor cement property with a fenced area. Later, the owners of the property decided to build an indoor rink.

By this time, Mom and Dad were married and living at the Bay. They soon built an amusement park across from their Triple XXX Barrel at the Bay. Dad had a partner, Denver Burtenshaw, and they installed a train track which encircled the entire amusement park. To this day, the train is still used here at Birch Bay as a racetrack.

Dad saw a lot of potential in Birch Bay. He envisioned families enjoying their local carnival, with neat places to eat, skate, swim, clam digging, and a small golf course.

After Dad and Mom moved to Birch Bay in the late 1930s,

World War II began in the 1940s, and Dad was enrolled in the reserves. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, he had to go to war. He was a captain in the army and was stationed in Alaska. While he was away, Mom ran the two Triple XXX Barrels and the amusement park with help from others. Every day, she would close the Bellingham XXX Barrel first, driving all the female staff home (as was appropriate in those days), then she would return to Birch Bay to close their Triple XXX Barrel, taking their female staff home afterwards as well. My sister and I were always babysat, and my aunt later told me that Dad and Mom were extremely picky over who they would allow to watch us. Over the years, many people would stop me to say they remembered babysitting me and my twin sister.

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Bellingham XXX Barrel Restaurant ~ late 1930's.

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Mel Cook, 1930's.

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Triple XXX Barrel restaurant, Birch Bay ~ late 1930's.



Outdoor skating rink.

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Birch Bay Amusement Park, circa 1930's

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Pot & Pan top photo; Grandma & Grandma Cook, Jill, Pan, and Pot ~ circa 1946.

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Pan & Pot - Birch Bay Amusement Park, 1945.

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Mom (32), Alice (38), Pot and Pan (4 years old). Birch Bay.

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Cook Family - Dad, Mom, Grandpa & Grandma Cook, & Pot (clockwise) ~ 1947.

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Birch Bay Triple XXX Barrel Restaurant, late 1930's.

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Birch Bay Amusement Park, early 1940's.

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



*Grandma & Grandpa Cook, Patsy holding Pot, Grandpa holding Pan, Jill standing
in front of Grandma ~ Fall, 1945.*

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Pam

Polly

Jill



*Pam, Polly, and Jill in 1951 + original ticket for Birch Bay Amusement Park
promoted by Vancouver Sun Carriers, B.C. Canada.*

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



*Grandma & Grandpa Pratt ~ December, 1957
Mom's parents + Mom, Jill, Polly, Pam, & Jill's daughter, Deja.*

2

WESTERN SHOWS

When Polly and I were in the first grade and Jill was in the fourth grade, our oldest sister, Patsy, married Dunk Freeman. She soon had Don, who was the first of her three children. Later, she gave birth to Dan and Dennis. Around this time, our parents sold the two Barrels and the amusement park. Dad used his earnings to purchase rides and established a new carnival called Western Shows. After that, each summer Mom, Dad, Jill, Polly, and I traveled each week to towns all over our state of Washington. Patsy, who was too busy raising her children by then, was home in Blaine, Washington.

The carnival operated from late June to mid-September every year, visiting different towns all over Washington State. Various people paid our father a commission in order to travel with us and display their games and different activities. In the winter, the rides and Dad's office were stored at the Lynden fairgrounds, which was about fifteen miles from where we lived. Dad hired two men to restore the

rides during the off-season in preparation for the following summer. I remember riding along with my father to the Lynden fairgrounds and watching as the men refurbished the equipment, making repairs on the merry-go-round horses, and ensuring everything was new and in working condition for the next season.

Joe Thomas, one of the men in charge of restoring the equipment, also worked for my father at the amusement park. He was a certified electrician and kept the entire park up and running. He also serviced the trucks that hauled the rides all over Washington from 1950 to 1957. He had authority over the other workers at the park and the traveling carnival, Western Shows. I remember during the winter season, he and his wife, Corrine, spent time at our home playing pinochle with Dad and Mom. They had two boys, Rod and Doug, who were older than Polly and I. Later, Doug worked on Western Shows for the seven years our dad was the owner.

My father met many people during his travels and established great friendships which lasted his entire life. In addition to Joe, he was also good friends with Denver Burtenshaw, who partnered with him at Birch Bay Amusement Park. They kept in touch year-round and were considered the best of friends. Throughout his career, Denver owned the Alpine Restaurant in Bellingham and the Johnson's Restaurant in Ferndale, as well as a restaurant in Canada at the PnE Fairgrounds. He also had a big part

in establishing the Orange Julius stands throughout North America. Long ago, they would transport the Ferris wheel to the PnE Fairgrounds, which had a larger-scale show with two Ferris wheels side by side. Dad also did the same when he had Western Shows from 1950 to 1957 during the Fairground. In addition to helping out Dad, Denver installed a cookhouse at our carnival to help Dad feed the workers. It was always stationed away from the rides, where people could buy hamburgers, hot dogs with the works, french fries, and soda pop. A closed curtain separated this area from the back area where the carnival help could take a break and enjoy two good meals each day (breakfast and dinner). Though our mom cooked our meals in our trailer (as we were seldom allowed to eat at the cookhouse), to this day, I still love the smell of fried onions!

A lot of hard labor went into setting up the carnival each week. An engineer mapped out the area (his nickname was Bozo, though I never learned his real name). The merry-go-round was always placed near the middle of the park. It played music which could be heard all over the midway. Music on meant we were open; music off, we were closed. The Ferris wheel was up front. Rides made for children were on the left side of the park, with my father's office stationed nearby. In the middle area, Mom operated the ring toss, where the objective of the game was to throw a circular disk onto a coke bottle. The winner received a gigantic teddy bear. The ring toss was four-sided, which meant that she

stood in the corner while rings were tossed at the bottles from all sides. Also, there was a stand where you could buy candy floss, a jewelry stand where you could get your loved one's name engraved on all types of jewelry, and a Bingo game, which was also four-sided so a lot of people could be set up to play.

When we had large tents on the grounds, they were placed beyond the game section, closer to the cookhouse and fun house. These tents would host shows with animals, the fat lady, the snake lady, and professional wrestling matches that challenged anyone from the crowds to a fight. There were also puppet shows, a 22 gun rifle range, and a Test Your Strength game with a hammer. I grew quite skilled with a rifle at a very young age. I also remember the Dunk Machine, where you threw a baseball at a target. If you hit the bullseye, the person sitting in the water-filled tank would get dunked! The Dunk Machine was mostly used as a way to raise money for local charities. There was also a fun house, with inverted mirrors and other unusual optical illusions, a ride called Loop-Loop, an octopus, a Shetland pony ride for children, and a high trapeze artist.

Dad put his heart and soul into the carnival, making sure it was presented well for the public. If we were set up in a muddy area, he would pour sawdust everywhere so the guests wouldn't be stepping in mud. (I still remember the smell of the sawdust.) The men who ran the rides were required to wear white uniforms with their name sewed on

the pocket. Their uniforms had to stay clean at all times, otherwise they would have to change.

Most families had their own trailers, which were behind their game section. Our trailer had a front room where Dad slept. There was also a kitchen and a bedroom in the back. In the bedroom, Dad built big bunk beds which accommodated the rest of us. Mom and I slept in one bed, while Polly and Jill took the other. The only downside to the trailer was there was no bathroom, just a pee pot, which we had to dump after each use. There were, however, porta potties throughout the carnival, including one near our trailers, and some towns had shower stations for us.

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Western Shows.

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Western Shows, wrestling exhibition tent, circa 1955.

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Concession owners & Pot in Sumner, Washington "jail" ~ circa 1953.

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME

"If It's Show Business. We Have It"

WESTERN SHOWS

12530 8TH AVE. N. W.
SEATTLE 77, WASH.

MELVIN T. COOK
RT. 1, BLAINE, WASH.

OFFICE SEATTLE EMERSON 1556
RES. BLAINE 1302



Western Shows, Mel Cook Business Card, and lower photo of traveling office ~ circa 1950's.

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Ferris Wheel photos, Western Shows, Darrington, Washington circa 1950's.

3

POT AND PAN

Polly and I had the most wonderful time during the summer months. It started when we were in the first grade. By this time, Jill was in fourth grade and our older sister, Patsy, was married to Dunk Freeman. Jill said she “hated us twins,” but it was probably just an older sister being annoyed with her younger siblings.

The other families, who ran concessions at the carnival, felt like a community, like an extended part of our family. Each year, the same families showed up, so we never got away with any tricks, but we looked forward to seeing them each year. And the same families meant the same kids to hang out with. They were all very hard-working folks, too, mostly from the Puyallup, Tacoma, and Seattle areas.

Yes, growing up on a carnival was our normal day-to-day experience. It was the only life we ever knew, and we had the best of times. Our childhood was filled with animals, plenty of inspiration, games, and tons of adventure. Whenever the carnival opened, it provided an opportunity to have a new

adventure. At the time, I didn't know how lucky I was to have these colorful experiences which would shape the rest of my life.

As I previously mentioned, the first three weeks in June and then the first three weeks in September, Polly, Jill, and I lived with Grandma and Grandpa Pratt so that we could attend school. They lived near Semiahmoo at the time, which is about as north as you can possibly go in Washington State before reaching Canada.

In Bellingham, early June meant the trees and flowers were blossoming. School was not yet out, so we would visit the carnival and parades with Grandma and Grandpa Pratt and Alice and Ethel, two of our five aunts. When school finished for the summer, we were then allowed to stay with our parents at the carnival for the balance of the summer.

The town's celebration lasted all summer, with many special gatherings, and the carnival played a major role in the proceedings. Each year, we were asked to return to the same towns. Looking back on those years, the more Dad invested into the carnival, the more rides and games we had, which kept everyone laughing and excited to see what we would add next.

In school, people would call us carnies and demean our opinions by saying, "You are nothing but a carny." They meant these comments to be derogatory, but I always thought we were normal. As I said, it was the only life I knew, and I was having a wonderful time.

While growing up, I served the role of Polly's protector. Sometimes people would call her a midget, which was an awful term. Whenever they would say this, I would push them down to the ground. Although she was born fifteen minutes before me, Polly was a head shorter than I due to her pituitary gland not fully developing. Other than her being a little smaller than me, though, nothing else was wrong with her. She was my hero and much smarter than me.

I was taught by sight, not sound, so the summer before sixth grade I had to stay home with Grandma and Grandpa for six weeks so I could attend summer school and learn phonetics. This was not a fun time, as I would much rather have been at the carnival with Polly!

Some classmates were mean to us and, on occasions, even a teacher or two, so school was not as fun as I would have liked. They would use a tone in their voice that I had never heard before. When I was in high school, my mother explained that some carnivals had bad reputations. She also let us know that our father's reputation was good, and he ran an honest business.

I can remember as a young person, when we were visiting a small logging town, there were a bunch of overly-intoxicated men who had been celebrating a wee bit too much. It was a Saturday night, shortly before closing, and the drunk men arrived at the carnival. They were going down the midway cutting our tents! Dad waited for them out front, swinging a large chain above his head, ready to take every last one

1ST PRIZE



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of them down. You see, Dad was a middleweight boxing champion in college and then an army captain during World War II. He was not afraid of anyone! Knives were pulled, the police showed up, and the men were arrested and taken to jail.

That was the only time I'd ever witnessed such a commotion! That is, except for the time when the same town hosted a kids show where a man was so drunk that he fell off the stage while performing. Polly and I used to see him on television during the wintertime. His name was Stan Boreson and he owned a dog and played music. After seeing him fall off the stage, we used to watch the show just to see if he would fall off the stage again while performing on TV.

One town (Oak Harbor, I think) had a bunch of neat events for children. It was near our carnival, so Polly and I went and played some fun games. We even won a lot of prizes for coming in first place. Polly was carrying a doll with a hat on her head, and I carried a stack of board games. On our walk back to the carnival, I heard some adults talking about us, saying stuff like, "Those children won so much!" and "I think they are from the carnival." When we returned to the carnival, Mom was overwhelmed. She even said, "If you do this again, please share and let the person who came in second place get prizes, too." This didn't sound fun to us at all, but she did not make us return any of our winnings. Pot and Pan, as we had been dubbed at an early age, got away with a lot!

At night, the carnival closed at 11 p.m. On most Friday nights, we kids would visit the bingo game because they had a television and channel twelve always played movies. Polly and I would run over there with a blanket and snacks and watch the movie. By this time, Mom and Dad would be in the office finishing up the paperwork, and they would always send their friend, Joe Thomas, to make sure we were in our trailer. Joe was Dad's electrician, as I said before, and in charge of taking care of maintenance on the rides. "No movie for us!" we would cry all the way to our trailer. You can see we were very protected, yes, indeed.

There were times Mom would let us attend a matinee movie if the carnival was set-up near a movie theater. I would hold Polly's hand like she was my baby sister and, once we got there, we would spend any extra money on more candy. Jill would sometimes go with us. One time, Mom found out where the extra money was going, and she said there were no more movie outings for us for the rest of that summer!

One time, we went to a matinee at 1 p.m. in the afternoon. *Moby Dick* was playing, and it played two more times after the initial showing. Finally, around 7 p.m., Mom came to pick us up because we had not yet returned. She was not happy! Even though our carnival was on the same street as the movie theater, we were too scared to leave after watching that movie. We had nightmares about *Moby Dick* for weeks after that!

One year in the wintertime, while Polly and I were in the

Girl Scouts, we were taught how to build a campfire. Polly and I thought it would be a swell idea to show our friends how to do this, so one day while we were in the town of Quincy, we all hiked up a small hill not too far away from the carnival. Well, this turned out to be a not-so-swell idea; the fire quickly got out of control and headed straight for the carnival! Luckily, the fire department was called and swiftly extinguished the flames. In the aftermath, there was nothing left of the surrounding field but burnt grass, and we all saw how close to disaster we had truly come: the blackened grass was only a foot away from seven propane tanks! Unbelievable! Needless to say, our parents were not happy. Polly and I got a spanking and sent to our trailer for a week. We were only allowed outside to use the outhouse. Ironically, the only good to come out of that day was one of our fellow culprits (Cecil and Betty's grandson, Terry) grew up to become the fire chief of Puyallup, Washington.

Another time, during berry-picking season, a local farmer stopped by the carnival to see if we kids would pick berries for him for the next three days. Oh, boy, were we excited! Money to be made! He sent a bus to pick us up the following morning, bright and early at 7 a.m. Lunch and water in hand and hats on our heads, we arrived at the farm eager to start. The farmer showed us the rows of berries and tags were pinned on our shirts with our assigned row. Well, I was the first one done! Proudly, I approached the farmer to have my card punched. When I showed him my

berries, he nearly hit me! He started yelling furiously. My bucket was full of *red* berries and the farmer wanted only *black* ones. Well, he hadn't said that! There were way more red berries than black ones, and he hadn't specified which berries he wanted! While the farmer was screaming at me, one of our boys was jumping from lane to lane trying to kiss a girl. He fired us all and made us leave his property. We had to walk the entire five miles back to the carnival without our lunch or water (which were still sitting on the bus). What a horrible, rotten day!

As I mentioned before, Mom's concession was in the middle of the midway, and the prizes were big, beautiful stuffed bears which came in these neat boxes. Sometimes, she would give us the box so we could play inside it. This one time, we took the box out behind the concessions and cut a large opening in it. We then went to the man who was running the puppet show and asked if we could use his puppets for our own puppet show. They were named Punch and Judy. Then, we went to the midway and asked kids to watch the show. We charged them ten cents for admission, and everything was going quite well ... until Mom found out. This brilliant plan cost us two days in the trailer. We weren't even allowed outside unless we needed to visit the porta potties.

We had all kinds of fun during the day. We could ride any of the rides for free. All we had to do was ask the person running that ride and they would let us on it. Sometimes

they would keep us on longer than we wanted. I loved shooting a 22 rifle because it was good practice. There were parades where candy was tossed to us, and they played wonderful music. I'll always remember the beautiful floats and marching bands. On the Fourth of July, we played at Everett, Washington, each year and they also had great parades. There was always so much to see and do, and every year, on mine and Polly's birthday, we had a massive celebration with lots of gifts and plenty to eat for everyone who attended. And who can forget the yard-long birthday cake year after year. We sure did enjoy our summers! During one of those wonderful occasions, I snuck into our wrestling tent to watch the wrestlers. Well, I yelled a lot at my dad's wrestlers because they were cheating, and my dad let me know I was banned from that tent and any of those goings on. I said, "Really, Dad?!" Later in my life, I spoke with a man in Stanwood, Washington, Nels Lindahl, who had wrestled at my dad's carnival. He loved the challenge, and he won! He laughed when I told him my father was the owner of that carnival. I was glad he had won his match and that he had loved his experience at our carnival. That was what Dad had wanted, wonderful experiences for people!

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Pot and Pan in Chelan, Washington "jail" ~ circa 1954

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Western Shows, Quincy, Washington ~ 1954.

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Sideshows, people wrestling, and snakes to draw you in. Animal exhibiting

A RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Ride crews: Wally, Polly, Howard, Bill, Walt, Earl, & Neal (left to right).

4

SNAKE AND RABBITS

When I was around eight, Dad helped a small side show at the carnival. He paid \$150 for a snake, and a lady standing on a platform outside, wearing a halter top and shorts, would hold the python around her neck to draw people in.

Once inside, they had me come up on stage in a bathing suit and presented me to the crowd. I got in a box and laid down. Then, he thrust blades into the box. By the time he was done, there were eight or nine blades all around me, and I was twisted in a very weird position. No one believed I could be okay. He then let them come up on stage and see me. I thought it was fun, and I'd get a dollar for every show.

The rest of the time, the same guy gave me the chance to look after the snake. Every day, I would take the snake out of the trunk and put him in a bathtub with water. It was pretty heavy and very long. Holding the snake with both hands, the Python hung down from my arms on both sides. I took it over to a round tub filled with water and, starting with the

tail, curled its way around the base of the tub, keeping its head out of the water. I wasn't afraid of the snake at all. I got paid 25 cents a day to do this. While the snake was soaking for 40 to 50 minutes, I would sit there and read my book. It was like a babysitting job. When the snake was soaking, sometimes I would go over and feed these cute little rabbits. There always seemed to be two cute little rabbits, and I was to feed them lettuce and carrots. I would pet them, feed them, and then put them back in the box and go home. I thought it was a pretty good job and that I was doing a good job at it—

Until I saw what they were doing with my baby rabbits.

One day, I went to my snake washing job. I filled the water in the tub, then went to take the snake out. When I opened the trunk to get it out, one of the baby rabbits was hanging out of the snake's mouth. Two feet dangled out, and there was a big bulge in the snake's throat. I slammed the lid and ran away screaming. They could hear me straight across the lot, Mother said. She thought I hurt myself. I was horrified! Running back to the trailer in hysterics, I cried the entire day.

As it turned out, they had to feed the snake live things. But I had no idea the rabbits I was feeding and playing with were food for the python. I refused to look at the man for the rest of the week or be on his show. I wouldn't let him put me in the box with the blades around me. I couldn't believe he was feeding those baby rabbits to the snake! I swore I

would never speak to him again. The moment I saw that little baby rabbit dangling from the snake's mouth, I quit. My mom told the man that I had taken it really hard and didn't want to speak to him. Mom and Dad hadn't thought about what it would do to me if I found out. That was the end of me soaking the snake and feeding baby rabbits. If I would've asked about the rabbits and known, I would have had nothing to do with that man.

5

TUNGLAW AND THE BERRY BOYS

Mr. Berry came to our carnival every year for two or three summers. He and his kids (I don't remember their mother) were from Vancouver, Washington. He had a big tent and a side show where people would pay to watch his animals perform. There was a black panther with green eyes, an elephant named Tunglaw, and a monkey. During our winter, it was summertime in Africa, and he would go there on safaris. That is how he ended up with the black panther and Tunglaw. After he got Tunglaw, Baby Belle was the first elephant to be born in captivity. It was in all the local newspapers. Baby Belle was three years old the first time she was on our carnival. But she wasn't a tiny little baby. We called her Baby Belle because she *was* a baby. Just not a small one.

Mr. Berry had two boys and a girl. They went on to college where they became veterinarians for the elephants at the Woodland Park Zoo. Years later, I just happened to be at the zoo with my husband and our son and was fortunate

enough to be viewing the elephants when I ran into them. Mr. Berry was in the newspaper years after that; he had had a heart attack in his barn and passed. Baby Belle wouldn't let anyone near Mr. Berry. They had to come in and tranquilize the elephant just so they could take the body away.

Mr. Berry had a monkey that he kept on a leash. One day, Jill walked by, and he attacked the back of her neck. Mr. Berry always said, "Don't turn your back on a wild animal." Even my dad told us that. Never turn your back on an animal that you do not know. I also got bit as a small child at Birch Bay. I turned around to go home and a dog bit me right on my back side! Dad took his gun and went down the lane after it. It scared my dad because it was a stray dog. He said to me that day, "Don't you ever turn your back on an animal, especially a stray dog. They're not like our dog. You don't know how they've been treated and, when you turn your back on them, they might hurt you." And it had.

When bathing Tunlaw, the Berry boys were told to take a hook in order to control her. One day, while at the Omak Stampede in Eastern Washington, Polly and I and the Berry boys were told to take the elephants down to the Okanogan River for a bath before the carnival opened. The elephants loved the river! They would squirt water and play and were just free to be, well, elephants! Usually when the carnival was on tour, the boys would have to hose them down because there weren't any rivers or lakes for them to bathe in. When the carnival went to the Omak Stampede, however, the

elephants had the entire Okanogan River to play in, and they couldn't have been happier. It was lots of fun!

On one particular occasion, Tunglew knelt down and Polly and I got up on her back. When we were sitting there, Tunglew started walking in the water, blowing water like a hose. Well, she then decided to go across the river to the deep part. She just took off. And there we went, Tunglew crossing the Okanogan River with Polly and I clinging to her back! The Berry boys didn't control her with the hook like they were supposed to. When we got out in the middle of the river, the current was so strong that it took Polly and I right off Tunglew's back. We were swept down the river half a mile before we could climb up the bank of the river. Once free of the river, we ran back to the carnival where the Berry boys had already returned to get Mr. Berry. They weren't able to cross the river after Tunglew themselves because it was too deep.

Well, Tunglew had decided to keep going across the river, riders or no, clamber up the bank, and proceed into town. Baby Belle, Tunglew's daughter, followed happily behind her. Everyone in town was shocked to see this elephant walking into town with her baby. Polly and I saw the Berry boys running across the bridge to get Tunglew. But that didn't stop them from getting in trouble. By the time the carnival guys got there, Baby Belle and Tunglew were walking around town. Mr. Berry was very upset! What if a car had hit her or her baby? It was *not* a good situation!

After the excitement Tunglaw and Baby Belle caused walking around town, the Berry boys couldn't come play with us for a week. They did their chores and had to go straight to their trailer. We saw Mr. Berry spank them with a strap. We felt really bad for the Berry boys and were really quiet for a few days. Polly and I had never seen anyone get hit with a belt before.

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Mr. Barry and his elephants, Vancouver, Washington.

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6

KAY-A-LETTA

ne summer, Dad hired an aerial act, a trapeze artist named Kay-a-Letta from California. She was very pretty, with dark hair and a good figure. I thought she was beautiful. I wanted to be just like her when I grew up. I was so fascinated every time she did her act.

Dad paid Kay-a-Letta to be at our carnival for the summer. She did her show on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night, and at the matinee Friday and Saturday afternoon for kids. During the Friday and Saturday matinee show, she would dress as a black cat and do all her routines 25 feet above the ground. There was a crossbar with rings on one side and a bar on the other. After finishing on the bars, she would climb up a twenty-foot sway pole above the crossbar, stand on her hands, and swing back-and-forth, taking everyone's breath away.

I loved the way she came down at the end of her act. Joe, our electrician, would hold a wire. At the crossbar, she had a line to the ground where, holding tight to a skinny bicycle

tire, she would come zipping down the line with a spotlight on her the whole way, right into the arms of a man. It was amazing!

I was ten years old at the time, sitting below as she did her act, watching in awe. I was so fascinated every time she performed. I loved the experience. It was one of my favorite shows. I followed her around like a puppy dog, asking questions on everything she did in the hopes of learning all her wonderful skills.

It took me three weeks to talk Kay-a-Letta into letting me go up the 100-foot ladder with her. One day, she finally relented. So, I climbed up the ladder with Kay-a-Letta (she had to check her rigging) to see how great it was up there. I wasn't afraid of anything! I wasn't allowed to go out on the T-bars, but I could only see where she did her act. I wanted to go out there. I knew I could do it.

It was about 7 p.m., and they were just about to put the music on and open the carnival. From up above, I yelled down at Mom. She was in her joint getting ready. Mother looked all around but couldn't see where I was. Then she looked up and saw I was waving, up on the 100-foot ladder with Kay.

She started yelling, "Mel! Oh, Mel!" Down the midway, here came Dad. He looked at Mom because he heard her calling him. She was faint, leaning over the joint, and could hardly talk.

She pointed up at me. Dad said, "Laura, it's okay.

Nothing's going to happen. Don't worry. I'll get her down." He came up under the ladder and motioned for me to come down. I thought, *Oh, he isn't mad at all, he's being really nice. You've been up here long enough.* Kay-a-Letta said, "Yes, Pam, you do what your dad says." So, I went down, and I didn't get a spanking or have to go to the trailer or anything. I don't even remember getting bawled out. But I know Kay-a-Letta did later. I never even thought of asking her if I could do it again.

Dad said, "You're not going up there again. Don't get any ideas about doing that again." Years later, Mom told me how faint she became when she looked up and saw me so very high.

It wasn't very many weeks later that I decided that I wanted to go home with Kay-a-Letta in the fall to California and train to become a trapeze artist. That way, I reasoned, I could come back the following year to the carnival and perform her trapeze act and save my parents money. All they would need to do is buy the rigging. I was sure my dad would let me go with her to train and come back to take over Kay-a-Letta's job.

One night, when we were eating dinner, I said, "You have to let me go with her and learn her job and let me do what she does for a living when I grow up."

That fall, Kay-a-Letta went home. My parents didn't let me go with her. I was devastated. I thought they didn't love me. I cried to my parents that, if Kay-a-Letta would teach

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me her act, then I could do it and they would just need to buy the riggings. I wanted so badly to go home with her for a winter in California and learn how to be a trapeze artist! It was my dream to be just like her! All I got that fall was a water pipe nailed up between two cedar trees behind our home in Mr. Klays' cow pasture!



7

THE OMAK STAMPEDE

The Omak Stampede was an annual rodeo that took place in early- to mid-August that our carnival would attend every year. There were two major rodeos in Washington State, one in Ellensburg and the Omak Stampede. For this particular event, Native American tribes from all over Washington State would come together for a celebration of culture and the marking of the annual rodeo. The stadium would be near to bursting with folks coming from all over to see traditional Native American war dances, bareback bronco riding, barrel racing, team roping, and (my personal favorite) watching cowboys ride Brahman bulls. I was completely fascinated by these bulls with their big, humped backs, the way they moved, and how fast they could throw a cowboy from their back. So dangerous and exciting! The cowboys must have been very brave to ride them! Once, many years later, while my then-husband and I were returning from Reno, we made a wrong turn near Redding, California, and ended up on a road that led us to a

field of Brahman bulls. I insisted he stop so that I could take in the sight. It brought back so many wonderful memories. Such majestic animals; so beautiful!

During the Omak Stampede events, a bunch of us children would get ten cents each to get in a little Volkswagen car that would run out into the middle of the stadium. They would open up the little car and all of us kids (about ten of us) would come tumbling out to the laughter of all!

Not only were there traditional Native American war dances, but we were shown traditional Native American clothing with its intricate beadwork, magnificent headdresses with feathers, and the art of basket weaving. All of this was part of the Omak Stampede, and part of the Native American way of life. I found their culture fascinating and, every year, I looked forward to the opportunity to see more. I loved to sit up in the bleachers and watch the Native Americans dance with their white buck outfits and feathered headdresses. There were even children my own age who danced. Along with the war dances, there were also graceful, slow dances. I would sit up there on the bleachers, watching from above, soaking in these beautiful sights. It meant a lot to me that the Native American kids, so near my own age, were so open about showing us their culture.

One time, when I was about eight years old, I got up on the stadium roof during the stampede. A Native American boy had let me borrow a traditional-style blanket, which I wrapped around myself and climbed up the back of the

stadium onto the roof. There were bleachers beneath, and I could see the carnival behind me. With his blanket wrapped around me, I attempted one of the traditional war dances, trying to imitate the beauty I had witnessed below. Boy, did I get a lickin' when Dad found out. I spent the rest of the day in our trailer. I will never forget that night, though; getting up on the stadium roof during the Omak Stampede and the way I felt dancing to the music.

One day, when Polly and I were eight or nine, a chief brought my father, Polly, and I to his home. He was a chief of the Lummi Nation in the '50s. When we walked inside his house, I saw that it was as neat as a pin. There were leather hangings on the wall and all sorts of Native American decorations. It was impressive. Then, he took out a large trunk. When opened, we saw that it was full of tiaras and jewelry made of hand-pounded silver and turquoise. He said we could have anything in there we wanted; just pick one item. Polly and I both selected a silver and turquoise ring, though Polly's was different from mine. We wore them all throughout high school on into our 30s. Later, I came to realize that the kindness that was shown to Polly and I that day by the chief was greatly due to the respect he had for my father. Everyone loved my dad, and this man was no exception. He was so nice to us, and Polly and I talked about that special day for many years after.

I loved listening to the nightly goings-on. When we went to our trailer to sleep, I would lay in bed at night listening to

the pounding of the drums and singing of traditional songs all throughout the night. The sounds traveled from the Okanogan River, down by where we had ridden Tunglaw. We laid there with our windows open and went to sleep to the sound of their music.

I was shown a great appreciation and respect for the Native American people and their culture in my youth thanks to the time our carnival spent at the Omak Stampede and Lumi Nation, and, to this very day, I am eternally grateful.

8

MILLER MOTH

The last year I was at the carnival I was going into seventh grade. Dad put Polly and I in the ticket booths to sell tickets all summer. I absolutely hated it. There were lights all around the ticket box at the top, which were incredibly bright. They lit up the midway with all kinds of moths. On both sides there were round bars that looked like we were in prison. Every night when it got dark, the Miller Moths would come out. They would dive-bomb us, and they had powdered white stuff that came out in our hair.

When the Millers dive-bombed me, I'd knock over all my change several times a night. When I scattered the coins, I could never find them all so I could never "balance." The tickets I sold, and what money I had left, resulted in Dad and I having words. He said if I refused to work in the ticket booth, I would have to go to Grandma's. So, I left the carnival early and went to live with my grandma for the rest of the summer.

That's the last real conversation we had. If I had just said, "Dad, screen the ticket booth so the Miller Moths can't dive-bomb me and cause me to knock over all the coins," I never would have left the carnival. But, no, I told him that I wanted to go home to Grandma's a month early. I didn't talk about it. I didn't say why.

Then, Dad got sick. He passed away that fall.

Looking back, I know now that that is why we should talk to our parents because if we tell them our problems, perhaps they can help us make it right. I never got to tell Dad the reason why I left, and the carnival meant everything to me. I didn't leave because I was lazy and didn't want to work. It was because I was scared of the moths dive-bombing me.

To this day, I hate Miller Moths, and if there is one near me it's got to be killed or I'm out of there! And butterflies are just moths in disguise!

9

DAD

The only vacation my folks ever took was in October during hunting and fishing season. Mother would go on hunting trips with Dad up north in Eastern Washington. They took us out of school for two to three weeks to go hunting. Dad would hunt pheasants and duck, and Mom would hunt with him. Mother had a .410 shotgun and a jacket that, in the back area, could carry ducks or pheasants. She also had hip boots to go fishing in the lake and river. She loved my father very much and loved their way of life. I have a lot of snapshots of their trips together and many pictures with their fish lined up on a board showing their accomplishments.

Suzy was my dad's hunting dog. She was always with him wherever he went, no matter the season. She would sleep with me at the foot of my bed but was always with Dad when he was on the go.

I will never forget the day my dad showed me how much he loved me by taking me on a special trip, just he and I, to

show me what a hunting dog was all about. That is my most cherished memory of my father. Since I was very much a tomboy, and he knew I would be interested, he showed me how Suzy retrieved birds and hunted. He was patient with me as I sat there watching. I couldn't believe he could train her to do that. Dad told me to sit down on the rock and motioned at me not to say a word or move. I just sat in awe. He used a whistle to signal Suzy because he no longer had a voice. Suzy would dive into the water or into the brush and bring the birds directly back to him. It was a beautiful thing to see.

After that day with Dad, I will never forget what a hunting dog is all about. I had no idea. On the drive home, I kept looking at Suzy and looking at Dad. I just couldn't believe what I had seen. It was wonderful to watch her wag her tail and be so excited. I really was shown what it means to have a hunting dog; it was a whole new world and such a wonderful experience!

I thought I had known our dog, Suzy. She had this special place in Dad's office where she laid, and when he went down the midway she was right there beside him. I mean, we knew Suzy was Dad's hunting dog. She loved it when we threw pinecones for her. But Dad said, "No, she's a hunting dog, you can't do that with her." Suzy slept with me every night, and I thought I knew her. But after that day with my dad, I saw a whole other side of her and her remarkable abilities. I couldn't believe a dog could learn all that!

Years later, Patsy said Dad told her he never worried about me. He said he never worried about Pam because he knew I was a survivor.

In second grade, Dad got lung cancer. He had a throat operation where they took out his voice box, so from then on, he could not speak. Dad would use a whistle when he was hunting with Suzy and, during the last few years, he wrote notes to everyone.

After Dad passed, Suzy would not eat, so Mom took her to the vet. She told us girls that Suzy had to be put down. To this day, I'm skeptical of her explanation. From that day that my dad took me out hunting with him and Suzy, he showed me what a hunting dog was all about. Suzy was not just a family pet; she was a true hunting dog. After much discussion, Polly and I suspected our mom told us a little white lie that day and actually gave Suzy to a new hunter. I don't think my mom thought that we girls would understand why she gave Suzy away, but *I* did. Suzy was a hunting dog, and what she truly needed after my dad's passing was a new hunting partner. In my heart, I knew this to be true and I wished her all the very best in her hunting adventures.

When Dad started to get really sick, he lost so much weight that, when he walked down the midway (carnival lot), people would come looking for him and tell my mom that they couldn't find him. He looked so different and became so small to the point where people wouldn't

recognize him. He lived with cancer for five years. It must have been very hard on both of my parents.

On October 7, 1957, when I was in seventh grade, Dad went into the hospital. He died on October 22, 1957. Ten days before he passed away, his father, Bill, my grandfather, passed away visiting him in Seattle. My grandma took him home to be buried in Albany, Oregon, then came back and buried her only son ten days later. The funeral was huge. I remember there was a Ferris wheel made of flowers and so many people. The very next year, my other grandma (my mom's mom) was in a car accident and died. The year after that, my mom's dad, Grandpa Pratt, who was driving the car that had the accident, passed away. My mom lost her husband, her father-in-law, and both parents between 1957 and 1959.

This was our life until seventh grade and, later, Mom moved us to Bellingham. Mom wouldn't run the carnival herself and didn't have anyone to pay to do what Dad did. Beyond there being maintenance all winter long, it was just too big of a business. Back then, women couldn't run carnivals. She had to sell it as soon as she could, since she had bills to pay what with Dad's cancer. When Dad went into the hospital the last time, they owed \$7,000. We had no cancer insurance and, at one point, he was on the operating table for 22 hours.

In 1957, Mom sold Western Shows for a quarter of a million dollars. She sold the carnival and our home in 1959.

After Mom sold the carnival, we stayed in Birch Bay until the ninth grade was over, then moved to Bellingham. Polly and I did not want to go. Polly returned our senior year and graduated from Blaine, staying with a friend and one of our aunts until the summer of 1962. This chapter of our lives will stay with us forever.

10

CLOSING

We were carnival kids, but we thought we were normal. Our normal life of imagination, fun, animals, and family. I was hurt in school when people weren't nice to us and called us carnies. I didn't know there were carnivals that cheated people until I grew up. It has been very important to me to show our family, friends, and you who my father was and what he was about. I'm glad I was born when I was and had the childhood I had. My parents were hardworking and created a respected life. The carnival was our way of life, and everyone at the Birch Bay Amusement Park and Western Shows was a part of the family. Even though my dad achieved professional success, he started his life over in Bellingham and devoted the balance of whatever he had left creating fun experiences for families.

The way I was brought up makes me who I am today; honest, caring, and devoted to whatever I'm doing. I am well-respected, and I know it's because of my family and the values I grew up with.

Dad created a way of life out of wonderful experiences. He showed me that we can do or be anything we want to be as long as we're honest and kind. This is a way of life that makes a good, respected leader. It doesn't matter what we do with our life. Be happy doing it. Wonderful experiences will stay with us for the rest of our lives, so chase those. We can carry the love, self-respect, honesty, and family values in our own carnivals of life.

From the 1930s to 1957, the carnival at Birch Bay and Western Shows travelling all over Washington State was a moment in time. In that moment, the carnival brought Birch Bay and towns all over Washington to life, bringing family values and fun experiences to everyone.

I have since returned to the same coastline where I grew up, living on the shores of Birch Bay. I am the happiest I have ever been, in a place I love with the memories of my childhood in my heart. In the summer, I spend my days at the beach with my son, grandchildren, their children, my great-grandchildren, building sandcastles on the beach like I used to with Polly. In the background, in my mind, I hear the instrumental music of the carnival traveling down the beach. The families and the cabins are still here, and the people from Canada and all over Washington and beyond come down to relax and enjoy life from the top of the hill into Birch Bay. There are now water slides for families to play at in the summer. No roller rink, but there is a kite and sandcastle contest and a parade. My own family won

the family sandcastle contest two years ago, building a hammerhead shark with a mermaid on its back. Yep, they won ten tickets to the Birch Bay Water Slide Park!

Growing up on the carnival taught me to never lie, to have self-respect, and to try and live a decent life. We have to love ourselves. If we don't care about ourselves and have self-respect, then we can't love other people. Dad showed me life is all about taking care of people and having wonderful experiences. It doesn't matter what we do with our lives. What matters is that we're happy doing it, and also making sure God comes first.

Happy traveling, and God bless you all! I so enjoyed sharing my ride of a lifetime.

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Pamela J. Cook, Birch Bay, WA ~ 2020.

StoryTerrace

