

Chapter Three

Leaving Texas

*“Nope, it wasn’t Texas, but it was home now
and all I could say was ‘Let the adventure begin!’”*



TEXAS WAS HOME and she had been good to us. As far as I know, none of my ancestors died in the Battle of the Alamo, which is the ultimate bragging right if you’re a Texan, but our roots went deep and I had always been proud that all four of my grandparents were born in Texas in the 1800s. My granddad, C.J. Henson—or Old Man Henson, as he referred to himself—moved to Abilene in the early ’40s from Seymour, Texas. He first worked as a produce peddler in Abilene and later owned a small neighborhood grocery store that became quite an institution. Aside from his grocery store, he traded in produce and junk, and built and sold cheap houses in North Abilene.

I remember my granddad as a heavy-set gentleman with white hair who wore suspenders, old-timey lace-up shoes, and an old hat. He liked to drive around in his old panel wagon, play dominoes, go fishing and talk about business, politics, his kids and grandkids. His domino-playing buddies were a hoot. I can still remember one of them who sold rat

poison. To prove that his rat poison was safe for kids and animals, the old-timer would show off to people and eat some. I noticed that he let it dribble down his chin and never swallowed. Even as a school kid, I was impressed by the old man's con, though I didn't believe it for a minute.

Daddy had left Texas once before when he served in World War II. His unit had been ready to ship out for combat when he received news that Uncle Shorty and his family had been in a terrible auto-train wreck near Houston. Daddy got an emergency furlough to visit Uncle Shorty, who was in critical condition at the time, and by the time his furlough was up, his unit had shipped out. Daddy later learned that nearly his entire unit had been wiped out in combat.

Daddy was re-assigned to the Army Air Corps bombing range in Tonapah, Nevada where they trained bomber pilots. He and Mother rented a small storefront on Main Street in Tonapah. They opened the Quick Photo Shop in the front, and lived in a one room flat behind the store. This was wide open Nevada in 1945, so in between soldiering and processing photos, Daddy operated a few slot machines, did a little loan sharking and did a little trading in cars, motorcycles, nylons and other hard-to-obtain wartime luxuries.

He always said that if his family hadn't been in Texas, he would have stayed in Nevada. Now we were fixing to leave family and friends again. My folks had bought the ranch on Wolf Creek Pass. The house and apartments in Abilene had been sold.

Daddy had bought and traded for all kinds of things he needed for the Colorado adventure: jeeps, trucks, cement mixer, table saws, water pumps and a huge assortment of tools and equipment. Some of his Abilene employees were going to go with us, including Cleve Bilbry, a husky seventeen-year-old kid from down the street, and Jackie and Jeanie Woods, a young couple in their twenties. Uncle Melvin would be left in charge of our remaining properties which would, at least in theory, help bank-roll Daddy's ambitious new calling: Resort Owner!

Ten years after the California Gold Rush of 1849 came the Colorado Rocky Mountain Gold Rush of 1859. Folks back then were called '59ers. One hundred years later, the Henson family began their own rush to the

Colorado Rockies. By the time I had finished the eighth grade at North Junior High School, everything was a go!

After all the good-bye parties, the first group to leave was Mother, Daddy and my younger brother and sister, Bennie and Melba. They pulled a Jeep behind the family's 1955 Cadillac, and rushed to get to the ranch before the moving van. The next day, Jack and Jean Woods and their two little kids, Patty and Greg, set out in a Jeep station wagon pulling a trailer. Struggling along behind, with Cleve driving and me riding shotgun, was Daddy's 1952 Chevy pick-up, loaded down with a cement mixer in the bed, and towing another Jeep packed with equipment.

It was the most incredible trip I had ever been on. We had all kinds of mechanical troubles with the truck. We were hassled and shook down by police in New Mexico. We saw the Indians on the plaza in Santa Fe, and we barely made it up and over two mountain passes. The best thing about the trip was that we got to eat in restaurants and hamburger joints ALL THE WAY! Man, that was livin'!

Finally, we entered the San Luis Valley in Colorado and saw the part of the Rocky Mountains that would be our home. After we arrived at the ranch, I was impressed by the land, the horses and the log ranch house that was built in 1910. But I could tell right off that life on a ranch in Colorado was going to be a big change from life in Abilene, Texas! We had no TV and no telephone. The closest swimming pool was the hot springs of Pagosa Springs, some forty miles over the then dangerous Wolf Creek Pass. The friends and cousins I had grown up with were hundreds of miles away and I knew I was going to miss them.

The local people seemed to have a love/hate attitude towards Texans. Some were jealous and envious of us, while others were fascinated by us and admired our spirit. I remember how rough the Colorado people dressed and talked and how they drank beer openly. They had an accent that was very different than ours, and most of the local people had very little money.

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