

Sweet & Sour Uncle



A love story and a dark journey into dementia/Alzheimer's

by
Jim Little

A love story like no other. A love that survived impossible obstacles and challenges. A dark journey into dementia and confusion. A story about difficulties caregivers may face and be prepared for.

SWEET & SOUR UNCLE

By Jim Little

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Author's Note:

Names of some individuals have been changed to protect the privacy and anonymity of persons and their families.

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Cover: Ralph H. Little on his Indian Motorcycle (1992 watercolor painting by Jim Little)

A must read for anyone with elderly family members.

Sweet and Sour Uncle is both inspiring and sad, a book anyone with elderly parents or relatives should read. I wish my wife and I had been able to read it twenty years ago, for we traveled a similar path similar to the author's, and the insights contained in this story would have helped us understand what was happening. Dementia (including Alzheimer's) is a group of diseases that slowly and silently begin to change a person's mind. Like the author and his wife, at first, we did not realize what was happening and what was in our future. Uncle Ralph's early signs and subsequent downward spiral provides the reader an understanding of what to look for, what to expect as the condition worsens, and the ethical and legal entanglements that may result.

– Lee Boyland, award winning author of *The Rings of Allah*, *Behold*, *an Ashen Horse*, *America Reborn*, *Pirates and Cartels*, *Triple Threat*, *Deep State Sedition*, and *Revolution 2016: Take back America*.

CHAPTERS

LIFE ON THE RANCH	1
DISAPPEARING WAGON TRACKS	15
GO WEST YOUNG MAN	25
WAR YEARS	29
LOG HOUSE IN THE WOODS	37
THE DARK YEARS	55
LOVE DEMONSTRATED	73
TILL DEATH DO YOU PART	99
D.M.V. S.O.B.'s	117
HOSPITAL ROOMS AND COURT ROOMS	163
CONFUSION AND HANDCUFFS	177
OUT OF THE WOODWORK	189
THE LAST RIDE	211
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	219

LIFE ON THE RANCH

In the Kansas farmhouse, Mae Stewart Little was having a difficult labor. The birth of her third child was not going well. The baby boy was not breathing at birth, and the attending doctor grasped the baby boy by the ankles and wildly swung the child about the room, until the newborn finally sputtered and cried, taking his first breath. The difficult birth had been partially because the baby weighed a whopping 12 pounds! He was named Ralph Herbert Little.

The date was March 15, 1908; the place was Utopia, Kansas. This marked the birthday of my Uncle Ralph. During 1908 in southern Italy and Sicily an earthquake killed 150,000 souls. Other than this disaster, the world was relatively peaceful.

James Stewart Little, the nephew of Ralph Herbert Little, has written these words. My middle name was given to me by my parents, after my father's middle name, Leonard Stewart Little, which was given to him as a legacy of my grandmother's maiden name—Stewart. This handing down of the Stewart name has continued with my son James Stewart Little, Jr., nephew Jacob Stewart Little and his son Jaxon Stewart Little. I knew my Uncle Ralph Little for 58 years of my life. Throughout this book, I will refer to him as “Uncle Ralph,” because that is what I knew him as.

Uncle Ralph said the wild swinging about the room, by the doctor in an effort to start him breathing at birth, caused him to be “rattle-brained.” Being a respectful nephew, I did not argue with him about this comment.

Uncle Ralph's grandfather was George Herbert Little (whose middle name he was given). George's parents were from Scotland and England; and Ralph's grandmother was Hannah Nunneley, from England. The couple was married in Clinton, Michigan, in 1872. They moved to Kansas with their three children: Samuel, Bessie, and Robert. They purchased a large farm north of Utopia, Kansas. Son Robert Little died at the young age of 21 with pneumonia.



George Herbert Little (1905)

Bessie Little moved to the Pacific Northwest with a seagoing husband. Samuel Little, Ralph's father, had been born in Mount Clemens, Michigan, and was educated at Washburn University. He majored in agronomy and had a burning desire to be a cattleman.



Little family, Eureka, Kansas. Left to right: Father Sam (holding baby Mildred), Marguerite, John, Ralph, Mother Mae (1912)

Sam married Melinda Mae Stewart, of Scottish, Irish, and Welsh origins. Mae's parents were pioneers in Kansas, arriving in the early 1860s. Sam joined his father George on the farm in 1899. George tired of farming and moved to the town of Eureka in 1905, leaving Sam to work the ranch. Sam's marriage to Mae Stewart resulted in the births of five children. The firstborn was Marguerite, second was John, Ralph was the third, and then there was another daughter named Mildred. Last to be born, and the youngest in the Little family, was my father, Leonard Stewart Little.

When Uncle Ralph was six years old in 1914, his younger brother Stewart (he preferred Stewart over Leonard) was born.



Leonard Stewart Little (age two), Mother Mae just out of sight at the left. (1916)

Also, the war—called the war to end all wars—World War I began. This was a huge economic opportunity for cattlemen because of the demand for beef that the war created. Uncle Ralph said his father would often pace the floor at night until the early morning hours, planning and scheming how to succeed as a cattleman. Samuel Little was considered a pillar of the Kansas community and was a founder of

the Greenwood County Cattlemen's Association. His large circle of acquaintances and friends knew him as "Sam."

He was often called upon to make speeches at community gatherings and could hold an audience spellbound, as he spoke eloquently without aid of notes or referring to any written aids. He was driven to become a millionaire. His desire for financial success was also motivation for his involvement in politics. He unsuccessfully ran for state representative in 1916. He was considered by many to be a future candidate for local and national offices when the opportunities arose.

Uncle Ralph remembered his cousin Ambrose Lee, who had joined the Army, and everyone thought Ambrose looked handsome and dashing in his uniform. He wanted to fight the German Kaiser, but Uncle Ralph said he did not make it overseas.



*(Left to Right) John, Mother Mae, Baby Mildred, Ralph, Marguerite.
John was unhappy to have picture taken with a baby Sister Mildred! (1912)*

There was plenty of work on the cattle ranch, requiring the help of hired hands. Sam Little often traveled to Kansas City, which was a two-day ride from Utopia, to buy cattle at the Kansas City Stockyards and also to find men willing to work for him on the ranch. Uncle Ralph said often the hired hands were not willing to work once they arrived at the ranch from Kansas City.

Uncle Ralph recalled a hired hand that his father caught killing and eating chickens from the family chicken coop. The evidence was found (chicken heads) in the buggy the hired man had been using. Sam Little was short in stature but had a notoriously bad temper.

When he discovered that the hired man had been stealing chickens, he told him he was fired, and began walking toward him.

The hired man was much larger than Sam, but he held up a harness pole in front of him, and the terrified hired man said to Ralph and others standing nearby, "Hold him back, don't let him use his 'knucks' on me!"

On another occasion, while harvesting wheat, the wheat threshing machine broke, and it had apparently been a frustrating day for my grandfather, because he picked up a rock and walked over to a nearby sleeping dog. He dropped the rock on the startled dog, and as the dog ran away from him, he exclaimed, "Damn dog shouldn't have been lying there anyway."



Horse drawn wheat threshing machine 1916 (no dog in sight)

Uncle Ralph remembered an incident with one of the hired hands his father brought home. He could not remember if it was after one of his father's trips to Kansas City, or if the hired hand were someone passing through town. Uncle Ralph said the hired hand was afflicted with "gray-backs." I assume this was lice. The hired man was a hard worker, and Sam took pity on him and bought some medicine that could be used to bathe with and rid a person of lice.

Uncle Ralph said his brother John and he were peeking at the hired man from a loft in a nearby barn, as the man was taking a bath in a large washtub. His father was directing the man how to use the medicine in the bath water. The hired man apparently was very unfamiliar with how to take a bath. Uncle Ralph said he and his brother began throwing corncobs high in the air from the barn loft, arcing them up into the air from the barn loft, toward where the hired man was bathing, and then they ducked back into the loft. After throwing one corncob, the hired man gave out a yell. He had been hit in the head by one of the corncobs. They felt badly about this, and he could not remember, but they may have gotten a spanking over this incident. Uncle Ralph said the medicated bath to get rid of the parasites was a mistake, because after the hired man's bath, he became lazy, and he was no longer the hard worker he had been previously. He was fired soon after the bath.



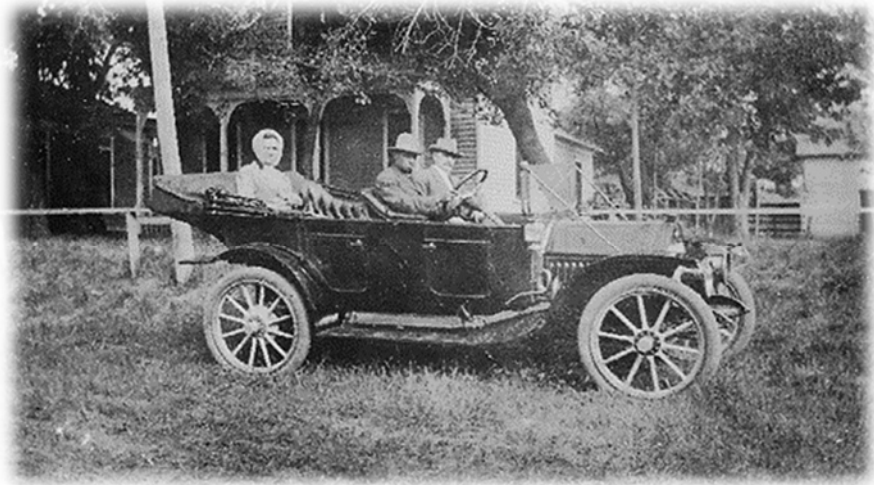
Horses and buggy, Mae Little at the reins (1914)

The family had one of the first automobiles in the Kansas county. Uncle Ralph recalls it was called an Everitt, and only a few models were produced in Detroit between 1909 and 1912. The car sold for

around \$1,800. Tires on automobiles at the turn of the century (1900s) were still in the early stages of development and were subject to many blowouts and failures.

The tires on the Everitt would blow out often while the family was riding on the rough country roads. Uncle Ralph said his father never cussed until he bought the Everitt and began driving the car and changing the flat tires on almost every family outing and on the weekly Sunday drives to the Methodist church.

Uncle Ralph remembered while riding with his mother and father his father would frequently ask his mother, “Mae, are we still on the road?” Roads in those days were not clearly defined and were often merely ruts in the dirt worn by passing horse-drawn wagons.



Sam Little driving his Everitt automobile. (Front passenger Herbert Little, rear seat Florence Little) 1915

Uncle Ralph and his brother John were opposites in temperament and personality. John was quiet and talked very slowly. He enjoyed hunting, expensive hunting dogs, and trapping for furs. Ralph, on the other hand, was talkative, always looking for mischief, and he worshipped his father. Sam seemed to favor Ralph over his older son John. Often, when trying to explain something or correcting John, he

would get exasperated, and tell Grandmother, “You talk to him.” Uncle Ralph said often John would (as he described it) “sulk up” and not talk for days.

John would hunt raccoons and other fur-bearing animals, sometimes remaining in the woods all night. Ralph did not care for hunting and trapping, but often his mom would make him go with his older brother. John used purebred bloodhounds for his hunting efforts, and he was an exceptional trapper. He had a couple of “mail order dogs” that cost close to a hundred dollars each, which was a small fortune in the 1920s. Skunk furs were sought after, with single white stripes preferred over the more common double stripe. Otter, mink, and beaver, as well as rabbit furs, could be sold. Crows were pests farmers fought constantly. Government farm offices would pay ten cents for each crow’s bill that hunters brought in. Uncle Ralph remembered one hunting season his brother John worked especially hard and harvested many exceptionally good furs. John shipped them to a furrier, who greatly underpaid him. This was a huge disappointment to John, and he never used this furrier again.

As I mentioned Sam Little was short in stature, and so was his wife. Uncle Ralph said the family had a weighing scale, and they both would weigh themselves frequently to see who was the heaviest. Uncle Ralph said his father would sometimes cheat and sneak rocks into his pants pockets so he would weigh more.

One food item that was always on the table during meals at the Little ranch house was gravy. Uncle Ralph said if there was not gravy on the table at the beginning of the meal his father would exclaim, “Where’s the gravy, Mae?”

Ralph adored his father, and he learned a way to get coins from him for the candy that he had a lifelong craving for. He would wait until his father was engaged in a conversation with another cattleman, or group of men, then he would tug on his father’s pant leg and ask for a coin to buy candy with. Very seldom would his father refuse him, being asked in front of others. Ralph schemed about a way he could get a bicycle. He told his father if he had a bicycle, he could drive his little sister Mildred to school. On one of his father’s trips to

Kansas City, Sam returned with a bicycle for Ralph. It was a joy for Ralph to ride his bike. Uncle Ralph was a prankster, so much so that his nickname in school was “Rip.” This nickname was gained because it was said it was impossible for Ralph to be quiet for long before he would “rip off” a joke or prank. This also got him into trouble frequently in school. Each time his father would learn of his antics, the bike was put up, so the bike was in storage almost as much as he was permitted to use it. Punishment was also meted out by spankings. Ralph knew a spanking was about to happen, when his father told him to go cut a branch, or sapling, from a tree, and bring it to him.

His brother John also assigned a nickname to Ralph; it was “Botch.” This nickname was not well liked by Ralph, and his brother John probably knew it. One day at the school Ralph and his brother attended, it was discovered that some of the boys had been telling dirty jokes to some of the girls. When the teacher and adults in the school learned of this, an assembly of the students was called, and Uncle Ralph, John, and others had to stand up before the assembled crowd and apologize. I can imagine the shouts of outrage from angry parents if this punishment was attempted in today’s Twenty-First Century school system!

Cattlemen would fatten up their cows prior to selling them. Often ranchers would drive the cattle they intended to sell to an area that was well known for its nutritious blue stem grass. This area was called the Flint Hills. The Flint Hills were a distance from the Little ranch. Uncle Ralph loved to work the cattle with his father.

Prior to one cattle drive to the Flint Hills, Sam needed his son Ralph’s help; however, Ralph was afflicted with painful boils on his buttocks. Sam said, “Mae, I need his help, so fix him up.” My grandmother’s solution was to tape jar lids over the boils, so Ralph could sit in a saddle. Ralph did not complain, because, as I said, he loved these short cattle drives with his father.

Silos were scattered about on the different Kansas cattle ranches. The silos were tall cylindrical towers into which grain was poured in the fall, in preparation for the winter months’ feeding of the cattle. The stored grain would create heat within the silo structures, which

would partially ferment the cattle feed into a mixture called ensilage. Cows eating and chewing on this mixture were said to have a contented, vacant, intoxicated look on their faces.



Cattle herd on Little Ranch, (1917)

Care had to be taken when filling the large silos, as there had been cases of workers and children falling into the silos and suffocating. Often in the winter children would climb to the top of the silos and stick their bare feet into the stored grain and feel the warmth on their feet.



Twisted Kansas Silo (1917)

Sam built a silo that was not constructed in the same manner as those on the other ranches. Uncle Ralph said the silo was built with green lumber, and after filling it in the fall, in the following few weeks the silo twisted. The twisted silo looked odd standing alone against the flat landscape of the ranch. Sam endured much kidding and ribbing about his “twisted silo” from neighbors and acquaintances. He did not take this teasing with good humor, and as soon as the silo was emptied, he had it torn down.

Ralph’s older sister Marguerite was often a target of Ralph’s peskiness. Marguerite was educated as a teacher and taught in a one-room schoolhouse for many years during her lifetime. She also kept books and performed accounting tasks for the Little ranch. Marguerite began dating a nearby neighbor boy named Floyd Wright. In those days it was customary for dating or “courting” couples to sit in parlors and visit, often with a chaperone. When Floyd would court Marguerite, Ralph would hang around the parlor often, knowing he was an unwelcome presence by the young courting couple.

Many evenings, Floyd would say to young Ralph, “Ralph, isn’t it your bedtime?” One evening, Ralph thought he would entertain the courting couple. He performed a magic act.

He walked into the parlor, with a blanket wrapped around him; and, after a few contortions, and wiggling, he held up the pair of trousers he had on a few moments earlier, and said, “Presto, change-o, from nowhere comes a pair of pants!” His sister chased him out of the parlor.

Uncle Ralph would enjoy listening to his grandfather George Little laugh when he read him the “funny papers.” This was my great-grandfather. Uncle Ralph said his grandmother Hannah died in 1910, and Grandfather George remarried in 1915. The “new grandmother” was not well liked; she insisted the kids call her Florence, instead of Grandmother. The couple returned to Michigan in 1920. In 1923. Great-Grandfather George died while playing cards, by laying his head down on the card table, closing his eyes, and passing from this life.

There were many colorful families and characters in the sparsely populated Kansas community that Uncle Ralph remembered. There was the family that was known for having extra digits on their hands. They were the “six-fingered people.” It was a tragic life for a boy and girl, who experienced both their parents committing suicide. There was the bachelor who constantly smoked a corncob pipe and was a stranger to bath water.

It was said that he was so dirty, and the collars on his shirt were so filthy, that when flies (which were constantly buzzing about him) would land on his shirt collar, they would slide off! There was a family from England that had a boy who became close friends with my father Stewart. The family spoke such “pure English” they were difficult to understand. The father had been a coal miner, and they eventually returned to Britain.



*Unknown lady dressed for church seated in front of house in
Hamilton, Kansas (1918)*

The Wright family, who lived on a ranch near the Little ranch, had first arrived in Kansas in 1860. They had an oddly constructed ranch house. There was not what could be considered a front door or back door. Upon opening one door at the end of the long building, a person would enter the kitchen. From the kitchen there was a door that

opened into the first bedroom, the opposite wall had a door that entered into the next bedroom, and each door led to another bedroom. As there were seven children, five boys, and two girls, there were many bedrooms. The last bedroom in the line of bedrooms had a door that exited the house.

Cliff Wright served in the army during the Spanish-American War. Cliff lost his wife to cancer in 1922, shortly after the birth of the eighth child (a daughter who died as an infant).

The Wright boys were exceptional marksmen. They could toss a can in the air and shoot it numerous times before it fell back to earth. They would shoot a rifle so frequently that the rifle bore would wear out and render the gun almost useless, as it no longer would hit a target with accuracy.



.22 Marlin rifle (gun owned by Uncle Ralph and discussed later in this book)

The Wright family was destined to impact the Little family in a way no one could have imagined.

LOG HOUSE IN THE WOODS

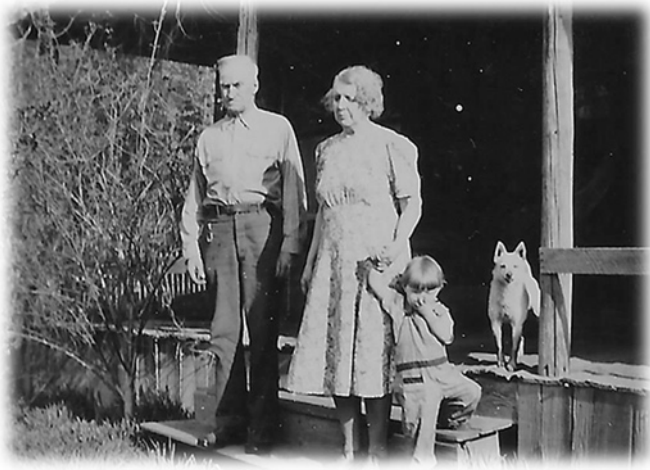
The temporary house was the living quarters while the log house Freda envisioned was being built. My strongest memory of this small one-room, two-story house was that it was very “cozy” with a woodstove, a wood burning cook stove, and upstairs bedroom.



Days Creek, Oregon; one room house still attached to the log home (1992)

I have stronger memories of my grandmother and step-grandfather's home located in Azalea, Oregon. I remember my grandmother (Mae) spending most of her life in the kitchen of her home. Beginning in the morning, she would arise early and stoke the woodstove, then cook a large breakfast; following which, she would clean the dishes, fix lunch, wash more dishes, and then prepare for supper. After supper there was again dish washing, and preparations for breakfast the following morning. She used an old-fashioned hand pump to run water into the kitchen sink. I also remember being hollered at through the bathroom door by my step-grandfather, after running a couple of inches of water into the bathtub. He was always concerned about the house well running out of water. I also was

amazed at the many tricks he taught his dogs. He also took the wrestling matches viewed on television much too seriously. During the showings he would become so angry and agitated, Grandma said he broke three televisions during a short period.



Step-Grandpa, Grandma, Jimmy, and talented dog, Azalea, Oregon (1945)

I was very astonished at the way he drove. He had a 1950 era black Ford V-8 coupe that appeared to only have two speeds—either stop, or extremely fast.

It was a thrill a minute riding with my step-grandfather. Most in the family would avoid opportunities to ride with him, but I tried to ride along with him every chance I got.

His car was kept in a garage that was above ground level, which required driving either up or down a wooden ramp to enter or exit the garage. The trip would begin with my step-grandfather Cliff starting the powerful V-8 engine, with me clutching the seat or armrest in anticipation. When the engine roared to life, he would stomp on the accelerator, and the black coupe would leap out of the garage, with wheels barely touching the ramp, and roar out of the front yard. Once on the dirt road that led by his house, he drove as fast as possible, with little regard to staying on the right side of the road. He often commented that the Oregon dirt roads, used primarily by log trucks,

caused a lot of bumps in the road, and a driver had to go extremely fast to keep from feeling the bumps. There was no consideration on his part about meeting any of these same huge log trucks coming in the opposite direction, as he rocketed and careened around corners, often skidding sideways, and almost running off the road and plummeting down the numerous canyons on the sides of the mountainous dirt roads.

I had a vivid imagination and enjoyed listening to various action heroes on the radio. On these wild rides, I imagined that we were living an adventure in the life of the fictitious radio program "Green Hornet." The Green Hornet had a car (named Black Beauty) that could outrun anyone! The ride would end with a sudden stomp on the brakes, and amid dust and squealing tires, the Ford would come to a sudden stop. My grandmother was the only calm, unaffected rider in the Ford, and she often commented, "Cliff is a good driver," to the horrified, wide-eyed passengers that might be riding in the car.

On one visit to Oregon life-long friends, the Milam family, accompanied my family. I was eager for my friend Dean Milam to experience one of Step-Grandfather's thrilling rides, I told Dean, "Just wait till we go on a ride with Grandpa!" I had told him about the wild trips I had in the past, and he was eager to go. The opportunity arrived, and one morning Dean and I were the only passengers with Grandpa. We sat in the backseat when the black coupe roared out of the garage, on another "Green Hornet adventure."

This was an exceptionally wild ride, and there were many near misses. I had liked to have not heard some of the choice words hollered at the black Ford, as we almost ran other vehicles off the road, including a few log trucks that were ten times larger than us. I am sure only two of the Ford's wheels were on the ground as we rounded the twisting, turning curves on the log truck road we traveled. Often the inertia of the turns squeezed Dean and I together against one side or the other of the car, as we slid back and forth across the rear seat. I think it ranked up near the top as one of the most thrilling, exciting rides I had with Grandpa. When he finally stomped on the brakes, the dust cloud enveloped the finally stilled auto.

I turned to look at Dean, anticipating a big smile on his face and validation of my previous thrilling descriptions of a “ride with Grandpa.”



The view motorists had, trailing Grandpa's fast “Green Hornet, Black Beauty” Ford auto, over Oregon's dirt-covered logging roads.

I was shocked when I saw Dean's pale face, with his mouth agape and his eyes wide open and unblinking. I was scared for a second; it looked like he was in shock! That was the first and last ride my friend Dean took with Grandpa.

Following the war, when the economy was booming, there were many speculators and shady businessmen looking for a way to make a “fast buck.” One of the schemes was to offer timber owners lucrative appearing prices for the timber on their land. Uncle Ralph said he was taken in by such an offer, and he sold a large portion of timber to a man who grabbed all the timber he could in the Douglas County area, before it was known that he was making a huge profit off the landowners.

The original Days Creek homestead claimed by Freda's father, Frank, in 1905 was 180 acres. Adjoining the homestead was another family named Ellis, who laid claim to 180 acres. This family was extremely poor, and the father was killed (circumstances unknown). Prior to the war, the family had been unable to pay the annual property tax. Aunt Freda told this family she would pay the property tax, and they agreed. Uncle Ralph said the family was destitute, barely able to clothe themselves. After a couple of years, the family disappeared, and Aunt Freda gained ownership of the 180-acre homestead, bringing the total acreage of the White Homestead property to 360 acres.

Freda's parents were an unusual couple. Frank White was an accomplished carpenter. He also was a surveyor, and he had surveyed the seven-mile, winding, mountainous road named the Days Creek Cut-off Road, which is still in use today. From reading papers and notes of Aunt Freda's, I have gained the impression that Frank dabbled in treasure hunting. Canyonville and Days Creek have a "lost gold mine" story that has circulated for over a century. According to Frank's papers a man named Ed Schieffelin who was famous for discovering the gold and silver deposits in Tombstone, Arizona, arrived in Canyonville the summer of 1897. He stayed in an abandoned cabin near Days Creek and spent a couple of months prospecting.

One day a rancher, who lived nearby the abandoned cabin, decided to visit Schieffelin, as he was going into the town of Canyonville, and he thought he would check to see if he needed anything, such as mailing any letters, as he had done in the past. Upon arriving at the cabin, he found Schieffelin inside dead. The rancher notified the sheriff and coroner, and they determined that the man had died of natural causes. On the desk inside the rented cabin, they found an unfinished diary entry that he had been writing to his wife in San Francisco. There was an intriguing sentence in the diary that said, "Have made a strike, to all appearances richer than Tombstone."

An even older treasure story, originating from the days of the Seventeenth Century Spanish explorers, tells of Spanish gold coins that were found at Shively Creek, near Days Creek. In 1906 the remains of what was thought to be a Spanish ship were found in an area called Melrose. It was believed that Spanish explorers had shipwrecked off the coast of what is now Scottsburg, and a tidal wave pushed the wrecked ship far inland. It was thought that the Spanish sailors explored the Days Creek area for gold and eventually traveled south to California. Frank wrote notes of his speculations to Aunt Freda. He never found the lost treasure locations.

Uncle Ralph said although Frank was skilled in many areas, he never seemed interested in earning a living for himself and his family. He helped build many houses for his relatives for little or no pay. His

marriage to Freda's mom fell victim to his lack of ambition, as they had been divorced in 1923. Freda's mom, Mrs. White, was grossly overweight, and she was a constant guest at Ralph and Freda's home.

After the war, construction of the "dream house" began in earnest. It was to be a spacious two-story, three-bedroom log house, with a large basement. The logs were cut from the surrounding forest and were pulled to the building site by a team of horses.

All the falling, cutting, and trimming of the logs was done by Uncle Ralph and Father-in-law Frank, with hand tools. The construction of the house was intermittent. There were times when money was short, and Uncle Ralph worked at various jobs about the community earning money for the construction project. An example of the short money supply was the fact that some of the foundation consisted of large logs, instead of the more expensive, preferred material, concrete.



Front of log house without window and door opening (1946)

Note the log foundation.

Sweet & Sour Uncle



“Last log” Uncle Ralph doing the honors (1946).



House without chimney and front porch (1947)



Picture taken in 1993

Aunt Freda continued her teaching job, working mostly at the Days Creek primary school. The large fireplace in the living room was constructed with concrete and rocks handpicked from the bank of the nearby South Umpqua River. When the house was completed in 1948, it was hailed as one of the nicest homes in the community.

There was a piano in the living room, and Uncle Ralph and Aunt Freda often treated guests to a piano and harmonica duet. They enjoyed entertaining and had a large circle of friends.



Living room with custom made furniture. (1950)

I recall one trip my mother and father and I made in the late '40s. I was incredibly young at the time and only vaguely remember this visit. Uncle Ralph and Aunt Freda had a pet skunk that she had found and tamed. The skunk had not been "deodorized" by removing its odor glands, and when it became excited it gave off a slight "skunk odor." As a young boy I was very fascinated by the skunk, which was aptly named "Stinky."

Aunt Freda was always adopting stray animals or wild creatures. She seemed more at ease around animals than people. This preference to animals over humans made her occupation choice as a teacher curious. During this visit, I was playing with Stinky, and Aunt Freda apparently became upset with me and struck me. I seem to recall being slapped. This caused strong words between my mother and Aunt Freda; most of the words came from my mom, and then there was a hasty departure from the log house. I remember my mother and father having a heated conversation while driving away. The emotion I remember most was confusion and guilt over what had happened. I knew that somehow I had caused an argument between my parents, whom I loved dearly, and the uncle and aunt I loved.

On another visit to Oregon, I was quite young. While playing with some of my step-cousins, they walked into a very thickly wooded, brush-covered section of the forest. After walking for a long while, taking many changes of directions, they all suddenly ran away from me and disappeared. I was confused, and surprised, about this sudden turn of events. They had never been overly friendly to me, often teasing me, and I had thought this adventure walk into the woods was a sign of acceptance of me, the stranger from California.

I walked around for what seemed like hours trying to find any familiar area in the woods. I began running about somewhat frantically when I realized that I was hopelessly lost.

I began to think I would never see my family again; I began praying that I would somehow find my way back to the house where my mother and father were visiting the relatives. Then I heard faint growling noises behind some bushes, I panicked and began to run. Stumbling and frightened, I fell to the ground, too tired to move.

Tears were streaking my cheeks, and I was sobbing with fear. After sitting there for a few minutes, it was then I heard giggling behind nearby bushes. One of my step-cousins appeared from behind a tree, and said, “Ha, ha, you were crying.” Then all re-appeared and began walking on a path, while snickering and laughing, keeping far ahead of me. Humiliated, I followed until finally the house came back into view. I do not remember playing with any of them for the remainder of that visit.

Almost annually there were trips made by my family to Oregon to visit my grandmother, step-grandfather, and Uncle Ralph and Aunt Freda, as well as my father’s stepbrothers, and stepsisters. The two previous traumatic visits I described were exceptions to the normally good times I enjoyed on these trips north. My sister Linda was born in 1946, four years after me. I remember the first time my sister saw Uncle Ralph. The drive from our home in Strathmore, California, to Days Creek, Oregon, was a trip of over 600 miles, over Highway 99, which was a winding twisting road through the northern mountains of California and the southern mountains of Oregon. This was usually a long, two-day trip. One visit my family made was when Linda was about five or six years old, and I was ten. We arrived late at night, and Linda was sound asleep. After the “hellos” and greetings, we all retired for the night, without awakening Linda.



Linda and Jimmy Little doing dishes (Strathmore, California, 1950)

In the morning Linda awoke and happened to look outside, and she spied Uncle Ralph for the first time. She became very agitated and excitedly told Mom, “Momma, Momma, look, look, there’s another Daddy outside!” This emphasized the resemblance to one another borne by my father and Uncle Ralph.

All the Wrights and Uncle Ralph lived within the largest county in Oregon, famous for the Douglas fir trees harvested there, in Douglas County. They were all employed in the timber industry.

I remember on many visits roaming through the Oregon woods surrounding my relatives’ homes (when I was much older, and cautious not to lose my way!).

There was a steep hill located on the southern side of Uncle Ralph’s house, which Linda and I used to enjoy running down as fast as we could, and then climbing to the top, and running downhill again. We also enjoyed picking and eating the plentiful blackberries, located about the log house, until our fingers and lips were stained purple. I also remember being thrilled to ride in the open-air rumble seat of Uncle Ralph’s Ford.

The log house was built on a steep hill, with little consideration given to level parking spots for vehicles. Across the road from the house, Uncle Ralph built a small, covered garage, which had a foundation of long yew logs, stretching down into a deep canyon. When a car was pulled into or out of this log-supported garage, the whole building would sway unsteadily.

Uncle Ralph raised sheep on his land, and I remember watching a neighbor named Smith shear his sheep. It was fascinating watching the thick woolen creatures undergoing his expert touch, and in a matter of seconds they became skinny, pink sheared animals, with their woolen coats lying on the ground about their feet.

One year a bear became a pest on Uncle Ralph’s property. It had killed a couple of sheep. He rigged up large chunk of beef to a shotgun and positioned it in the woods.

A line was tied to the bait, which led to the shotgun trigger. Wildlife laws were not very strictly enforced in the ‘40s and ‘50s. The

next morning, he found a large black bear lying dead of a shotgun blast to the chest. He gave the bear meat to a nearby family that had many children to feed.

For the first few years in the log house, they did not have electricity, as the power company had not strung lines to the house. They used oil lamps for lights at night, and refrigeration was with an icebox. The house was wired for electricity, and they had a diesel-powered generator they used to supplement the oil lamps, and for listening to the radio. It was an exciting day when the power poles finally reached the log house, and they had a permanent source of electricity. A telephone was also a welcome addition to the house.

Uncle Ralph and Aunt Freda attended Days Creek United Methodist Church, near their home. Churches, as well as fraternal organizations, were—and are—cohesive factors in most American communities, and Days Creek and nearby Canyonville were not exceptions to this rule. The Masonic Lodge of Canyonville was populated by most of the prominent men of the community. Uncle Ralph joined the Masonic Lodge in 1948, and after three years he was elected as the Master of the Lodge, serving for a year in this highest position.

It was during one of the Lodge meetings a proposal was made that a bank be started in Canyonville. At the time citizens of Canyonville and Days Creek had to travel 20 miles or more to reach the closest bank, in the town of Myrtle Creek. All the members of the lodge tossed money into a hat. Uncle Ralph contributed \$1,500. This was the beginning of the South Umpqua Bank. The bank opened for business in the upper story of the Canyonville Masonic Lodge. Lodge members contributed both labor and money to get the bank started. After a couple of years, the bank moved to a different location within the Canyonville city limits. After a few more years, the bank began to expand to nearby cities. In the 1990s the bank's name was changed to "Umpqua Holding Corporation," and their slogan became, "The world's greatest bank." Now a little over 70 years later, the bank has spread throughout most of Oregon and into the states of Washington, Idaho, California, and Nevada totaling over 200 branches, and

employing well over a thousand people. The bank has grown into a giant, considering its humble beginnings. Most of the original investors have passed from this life. I am sure they would be amazed at the success of their idea to create a local bank.

On February 21, 1951, an event occurred that Uncle Ralph was involved in that was to be remembered for years afterwards. The event was the Days Creek Parent Teachers Association (PTA) Talent Show, held in the Days Creek School gym. The newspaper clipping of the show that I have says the show got off to a flying start at 8:00 p.m. and went all out to entertain the audience, and there was never a dull moment during the whole evening. The paper says that Major McEwan of the British Army acted as the Master of Ceremonies. There were over 22 acts, vocal numbers, poem readings, and dramatic skits. Aunt Freda and two ladies sang, "The Old Village Choir." The paper says after one burlesque act, not to be outdone Ralph Little perked everyone up on their toes again with his Kansas jig tune, "Turkey in The Straw."

The paper reported that Ralph Little won first prize and was awarded a whisk broom doll. He had danced while playing his harmonica and treated the audience to an encore performance. This must have been a very memorable evening, as over 50 years later people around Days Creek still spoke of Uncle Ralph's famous skit!

Uncle Ralph, and Aunt Freda traveled south from time to time to visit my father and mother, and sister Linda and me. One exceptional trip was made in the mid '50s, when most of the Littles made a long return trip to the place of their roots, Kansas. On all these trips to Kansas I was always fascinated by the stuffed bobcat on Uncle Floyd and Aunt Marguerite's fireplace mantel.



Bobcat on fireplace mantel, (photo by Jim Little, 1986)

As always, on these visits to Kansas, there was fishing in the many ponds built by my Uncle Floyd Wright on his ranch and at other fishing spots around the Kansas countryside. Many pictures of these trips are of strings of catfish held up to show the results of a day's fishing.



Imogene, Jimmy, Linda, and Stewart Little after a day of fishing (1949)

The three Little brothers, two sisters, and their families gathered at the Floyd and Marguerite Wright ranch for a memorable get-together in the mid-'50s.



Three brothers, left to right: Ralph, John, Stewart Little (1956)

I cannot recall if this was one of the road trips my grandmother and step-grandfather made or not. I do remember that this was the first, and only, time I was to see my Uncle John Little.

My grandmother was legendary as the most patient fisherwoman I have ever seen. She could sit almost motionless for hours, while waiting for a fish to bite her hook. She also said it was best to spit on the bait, prior to casting. This “secret” has been proven scientifically to be a good method. The spittle erases human scent that might remain from fishermen handling the bait. Uncle Ralph loved his mother. I found this poem written by him that reflects that love.

Woman’s Rights

Today I hear a surge of soprano voices crying out for equal rights.

I always thought that the role woman played in the system of life was too important to bring her down to man’s level.

My Mother designed me and brought me into the world, because my Father wasn’t equal to the task.

Sure, I carry my Father’s name, but my Mother was able to give me the love that will carry me from the cradle to the grave.

You have heard it said that God couldn’t be with us every hour of every day, so he made Mothers.

I can’t imagine any woman with such an important mission in life, giving it all up to go to a rodeo and be able to throw the bull like a man.

Equal rights? No man could be equal to my Mother.

Love and respect is the bridge of equality between a good man and a good woman.

With such a blessing conferred by God on each member, that which is supposed to be should never be shattered by competition to see who wears the proverbial pants.

Uncle Ralph and Aunt Freda made infrequent trips to Reno and Las Vegas, where Uncle Ralph said Aunt Freda enjoyed playing the nickel slot machines. As frugal and tight-fisted concerning money as

he was, it is hard for me to imagine Uncle Ralph getting much enjoyment out of these gambling trips. He once said, "Gambling isn't a sin unless you win!"

On one of these trips to Las Vegas in the early 1950s, Uncle Ralph and Aunt Freda stopped for a visit with my parents in California, on their return trip to Oregon. Following the visit, my parents were baffled over the conduct of Ralph and Freda. They said normally they were argumentative and would disagree over the smallest things. Often one or the other would storm off to bed in the evening, appearing to have been offended. On this visit, they were overly polite and considerate of each other. Uncle Ralph wrote poetry, and two poems hint at some of the contentious aspects of their marriage:

"Freda Prepares for Church."

*She looks at her face
Then powders her nose.
Again inspects her face
And adjusts her clothes
Time marches on
And still she lingers
Scanning the mirror
And cleaning her fingers
My patience is waning
As I pace the floor
Still she gazes at the glass
Although she's seen it before*

Another follows:

"A Slave's Tribute to His Master"

*I've studied long and found it so
A man's wife, he hates to see go
It's not altogether the things they do*

*Rather a state of mind man gets into
A disease of the brain, I would say
Which grows in proportions when the wife's away
As I sit here humbly in my place
Tainted dishes galore stare me in the face
They seem to quote, "Your (sic) to blame
Arise and rid me of this inflicted stain."
But I snub them soundly in great disdain
To frankly enlighten you, they give me a pain
Now if my wife were here t'would be my joy
To see her wade in with zest, oh boy!
But she is departed, to my chagrin
So they'll wait negligently in the state they're in
Pity greatly this hulk of a man
For your presence would help to beat the band
Oh, give me not this bachelor's life
But let me forever argue with my dear wife*

My mother and father suspected something strange had happened in the marriage; their intuition proved correct. Aunt Freda had begun having an affair with an old childhood sweetheart, and Uncle Ralph was about to enter some of the darkest years of his life. His future was about to change drastically.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jim Little pictured with his wife Carmen and dog Lucky. A retired US Navy Officer with 30 years active duty (1960-1991). After retirement he settled in rural Oregon and became involved in veteran's causes and issues. He wrote a book about his Navy career: *Brotherhood of Doom: Memoirs of a Navy Nuclear Weaponsman* (published by BookLocker in 2007). He is always mindful of the 42 sailors who gave their life serving in the US Navy during his time of service. Uncle Ralph was his beloved uncle, who he highly respected and cherished

As well as volunteering in the local civilian and veteran community both the author and his wife are trained VA Hospice volunteers. He conducts quarterly memorial services at a nearby National VA Cemetery for deceased veterans who were not afforded a proper burial and military honors.

Sweet & Sour Uncle



A love story and a dark journey into dementia/Alzheimer's

by
Jim Little

A love story like no other. A love that survived impossible obstacles and challenges. A dark journey into dementia and confusion. A story about difficulties caregivers may face and be prepared for.

SWEET & SOUR UNCLE

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