

A Summer in Paradise

A SUMMER IN PARADISE

Nineteen thirty four: that was the best of times. I was seven then. My world was Oxford Street with a rosy glow called Berkeley just beyond. Life meant enjoying grammar and Sunday school; playing with Peggy and George Dowling, Claudia Murphy, Philip Sizer, and the rest; running the Oxford Coast-Coach Lines with Dick Twomey; hiking in the hills, automobile rides with Uncle Ralph or Uncle Ted; and occasionally going all the way by train and ferry across the Bay for a walk in "The City".

Nineteen thirty-four: that was the worst of times. The country was four years into the Depression. There was drought, crickets, and the Dust Bowl. Townsend promoted his relief plan for old folks. Mussolini and Hitler were uncomfortable noises upsetting the country's wish for isolation. The ILWU organized the docks in San Francisco and a general strike loomed. Emeryville Chemical Company failed, and Dad lost his job.

That summer Mrs. Davis, a neighbor in the next block, invited us to spend a couple of weeks with their family in Paradise.

I don't think my folks knew the Davises well. Their kids, Charles, Dorothy, Barbara, Bobby, and Mary were considerably older. Mr. Davis and Charles were pretty much consumed by their wrecking business (he had a contract that year to tear down the Berkeley High auditorium and science buildings), and Mrs. Davis was something of communitarian nut (I think). But I suppose my parents considered getting out of town a pretty good idea: vacation in the country, the possibility of a dangerous general strike in Berkeley, and Dad looking for work. Besides, there was the James family. My folks liked and respected them; they were supposed to be going along, and they probably vouched for the proposal.

Now, I don't know who or what group promoted the Paradise scheme, but in retrospect it probably had a connection with the Friends Meeting on Vine Street in Berkeley. The name was pure whimsy. In fact, the community perched on a high, dry, rocky ridge in the hills above Chico; it was hotter than hell in high summer; the vegetation was scrub pine and chaparral; unemployment probably ran about 70 percent; the half-finished house was the norm; streets were dirt; sewer and water non-existent. I'm not aware of any reason for a settlement there, save that land was cheap. There were maybe a couple of hundred people, served by an IGA store, a gas station (that burned down that summer), and not much else.

Whatever, the Davises were proprietors of ten forlorn acres, comprising a large rambling log house, a barn (with cow), some chickens, an overgrown orchard, a well (and maybe a septic tank), a small creek across the back of the place that was great for playing in, some oak trees with mistletoe (I learned there and then what kissing was about). It was about a mile from the IGA store and five thousand miles from anything that looked to me like civilization.

OK, that sets the stage.

We—Mom, Ralph (6 years), David (three years), me, and Mr. James— left the Shafter Avenue station in Oakland on the Sacramento Northern. The ride was an experience in itself. The SN was one of a breed that has been extinct since the 1930s; an electric passenger rail system designed to do what automobiles now do: connect smaller towns to central cities using city streets, narrow rights-of-way, and two or three linked passenger cars. So, we rolled up Broadway Terrace, sped through Montclair, dove through the Oakland hills in the Chabot tunnel, passed Moraga, Walnut Creek, Concord, and came to the river just above Suisun Bay. We rolled onto the ferry, landed on the other side, had some lunch that we brought with us, and crossed the river again onto the streets of Sacramento. From there we bounced along to Woodland (where I

had had my introduction to chicken pot pie—wonderful—courtesy of the James, the previous Easter on a preview trip), then Marysville, Oroville, and Chico. There Mrs. Davis met us with the family limousine—a big old mud-caked Reo with jump seats for the ascent to Paradise.

So far so good.

The first night or two were great. In residence were Mrs. Davis, Charles (about 19), Dorothy (about 18), Barbara (13), Bobby (10 and sick), Mary (7), Mom, Ralph, David, and me. Mr. James went back almost immediately; the rest of the James never showed; Mr. Davis stayed in Berkeley to wreck the high school and never did appear.

But it was downhill from there. Tragically, Bobby was diagnosed with a brain tumor so that he and his mother were in Berkeley on and off for much of the summer. (Bobby later died.) When Mrs. Davis was in residence we had a car; otherwise it was shank's mare. For a couple of weeks Charles was the man about the place (and the only one who could milk the cow) but he was supposed to help his father in town and soon left. By lurches Mom, with some help from Dorothy, was forced to assume the roles of chief cook, general supervisor, recreation director, livestock manager, mediator among two sets of unmatched siblings, and, in the case of Barbara who assumed the role of tormentor general, matron.

About three or four weeks later Dad showed up. I'm pretty sure Mom had cued him and his was a rescue mission; whatever, his presence had a salutary effect on everyone. It's my supposition, looking back, that he gave Mom courage, set Barbara straight, stopped Mary (and maybe me) from harassing Ralph, organized chores like picking the rotting fruit in the orchard and gathering eggs, learned how to milk the cow (the neighbor had been doing it), saw and said that the whole communal living setup was crazy (I think that there was some sort of exchange-of-goods-and-services going on, but

comprehension of that was beyond a seven-year-old), and made arrangements for our return as soon as Bobby's situation would allow.

Some vignettes.

Somewhere along the line the Davises had gotten the idea that the well was polluted by a dead animal, so they'd draw the water, put it in big pots on the stove, boil it, bottle it and put it (hot) into the refrigerator. This continual operation meant that the kitchen was awash much of the time, the stove (wood) ran full time in 90-degree heat, and the refrigerator ate up electricity. Dad observed, analyzed, asked who declared the well polluted (they didn't know, but it was so), got a grappling hook, couldn't find anything in the well but did discover that in fact it tapped an underground stream, declared the water pure, and put an end to the water-sloshing madness. Nobody got sick.

Mrs. Davis, when present, may not have been very practical, but she was good with us kids. She'd take us as often as possible to Nelson's Bar on the north branch of the Feather River to swim. It was maybe ten miles away on a series of dirt roads, and we'd go flying along in the Reo singing and kicking up a great cloud of dust. Nelson's Bar no longer exists; the river has been dammed up and it's covered with maybe twenty feet of water. Too bad.

One time she and Mom organized a trip to Stirling City, about thirty miles up the road from Paradise, to visit the sawmill there. My memory of it is still clear: a very large, noisy place with two sets of gang saws traveling back and forth at considerable speed making lumber out of pine logs that were maybe three feet in diameter. A wonderful learning experience for kids; I wonder if that mill still exists, and if it does, whether it still fascinates kids.

Mary was a free spirit, or at least had experienced fewer

restraints than I had. She could weave the most absurd tales; I don't think I completely believed them at the time, but they left an impression. To wit: the bachelor who lived across the street was crazy and engaged in strange rituals; the rabbits that lived in the woods next door had tularemia and we would die if we got near them. She was also responsible for my education re mistletoe.

One evening Dorothy arranged a mystery dinner. The (overworked) refrigerator had accumulated an inordinate number of leftovers, so she labeled each with a number (entrees: 1-10, drinks: 11-20, desserts: 21-30, etc.) Then we sat down and ordered by number: "I'll have a 5 and a 13 and a 27". I've never forgotten having a hard-boiled egg as my sole entrée.

It was a memorable summer. I was about to say I'd love to repeat it, but that's not really so. From a kid's point of view there were lots of high spots (and some low ones too) but I realize that had I been a few years older (or younger) it wouldn't have been so great. Decades later Mom got a lot of laughs recalling her role in the farce, but I'll bet she spent quite a few of her nights at the time wondering how she ever got into this situation.

Well, we did come home; Dad did get part-time jobs and then full time with California Ink Company; Berkeley High got its new auditorium two decades later; the Davises left Berkeley; Bobby died; the home place became Mendon's Nursery*; we grew up. Now I look back on Paradise as a golden memory, one of those key events in a long and happy life.

JEC, 7/16/2005