

GRANDDAD—MYSTERY MAN

by Bert Jahn

Chapter One

The Search Begins

Sylvia and I became interested in genealogy when my cousin researched my mother's family, and my sisters decided that it would be a good idea for me to do the same for the Jahn family. I was willing, but soon ran into trouble, as my grandparents had immigrated from Germany, and it was hard to trace them from this side of the Atlantic. Sylvia's mother posed the same problem, because she had come from Norway as a young lady. That left Sylvia's father, and since by now the genealogy bug had bitten us, we decided to go to work on his ancestry.

We didn't know much about "Granddad," because he seldom spoke of his family. In fact, Sylvia said he once answered one of her mother's questions with, "I don't ask about your family—you don't have to ask about mine."

Furthermore, he deserted his family when Sylvia was 12, and we didn't become reacquainted with him until much later.

There were some things, though, that we knew—or thought we knew. We don't know whether he told us all these things, or just allowed us to jump to conclusions and never corrected us.

- His name was Charles Everett Wendel, and he was born in San Francisco April 2, 1884.
- His parents died in the San Francisco earthquake in 1905.
- Sometimes he lived with his "old Granddad in Kansas," who was the only relative I ever heard him mention.
- He falsified his age in order to enlist in the Spanish-American War. His war service was in the Philippines.
- On October 28, 1912, he married Sylvia's mother, Marie Isdahl, in Billings, Montana.
- His step-brother, Langdon Smith, is credited with writing the poem, "Evolution," but Granddad claimed that he wrote most of it himself.
- On May 3, 1965, he died in the Veterans' Hospital in Portland, Oregon, and he was buried in the Willamette National Cemetery.

With all these data at hand, we set to work. Sylvia's sisters came up with some additional information right away. First, a copy of his death certificate, which identified his parents as John Wendel and Carrie Carson. Also a sheet which had been compiled by a neighbor lady who had come in periodically to help with the housekeeping and cooking before Granddad's final trip to the hospital. We were never able to determine just who this lady was, or why she recorded the following information:

CHARLES WENDEL, SR.

Born: San Francisco, California, April 2, 1884

Reared: San Francisco, California

Attended: Stanford University for a short time

Spanish-American War veteran

- Joined: Crescent, Iowa, November 20, 1901
- Discharged: Fort Logan (Denver), 1904
- Stationed: Philippines

Grandfather: From Fredonia, Kansas

Married: Dolly Paget at Ft. Logan (Denver), in 1905.

- From Cheyenne, Wyoming
- Deceased 1910.

Employed: Billings, Montana, 1912, freelance writer

Building business started, Billings, Montana

Married: Marie Isdahl at Billings, Montana, October 28, 1912

- Five children
- Deceased July 1951

Married: Bessie Amens Trask, 1952

- Deceased 1956, Newberg, Oregon.

Married: Myrtle Welch, from Eugene Oregon, May 1957

Elected commander of Spanish-American War Veterans, McMinnville, Oregon

Step-brother: Langdon Smith, writer.

Most of this we already knew, of course. Learning the additional facts of his Army service was helpful. Even more so was pinpointing Fredonia as the home of his “old Granddad in Kansas.” But the real bombshell, the event that was eventually to become the key to the mystery of Granddad’s identity, was his marriage to Dolly Paget. This really excited Sylvia. She had never heard of this union before, and she was sure her mother had not, either. And if Dolly had borne any children, they would have been Sylvia’s half brothers or sisters!

Chapter Two

The Mystery Deepens

Our elation at getting so much information so easily was soon dampened by a series of frustrations. We tried to get a birth certificate and were told that all records prior to 1905 had been destroyed in the fire that followed the earthquake in San Francisco. We ordered military and pension records from National Archives, and the order came back marked, "No record." The Adjutant-General in Iowa also had no record of his service. This puzzled us, since we knew he would have had to prove that he was a veteran in order to get treatment at the Veterans' Hospital or burial in the National Cemetery.

We wrote to both the hospital and the cemetery and were told that they had no records other than his name, rank, dates of birth and death, and dates of service. These had come from the Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, which was subsequently severely damaged by fire.

We visited the public library in San Francisco and found no Wendels listed among those who had died in the earthquake. We studied the 1880 census for Fredonia, Kansas, and found neither Wendels nor Carsons. The Colorado Historical Society had no record of a Charles Wendel, Dolly Paget, or Langdon Smith.

Then, nearly three years after we began our search, we made a few encouraging discoveries. In the public library in Cheyenne, we found a 1907 City Directory that listed a Dollie Pagett working as a clerk at the Sherman Company. At that time it should have been Dollie Wendel, but the librarian assured us that many of the entries had been copied verbatim from previous issues, and this could very well have been the Dollie in whom we were interested.

Proceeding on to Fredonia, we visited the Historical Society and found a booklet listing all the marriages in that county, Wilson, between 1850 and 1910. Full of hope, we looked at the index, but found no John Wendel. The lady in charge, noting our disappointment, pointed out, "The brides are listed in the back of the book."

We looked again, and there was Carrie Carson, married July 1, 1882, to—not John Wendel, but to William Davis! Her address was given as Coyville, a village about 15 miles from Fredonia.

This marriage had taken place less than two years before Granddad's birth, and the record raised more questions than it answered. Just how did William Davis and John Wendel fit into Carrie's life? Was she actually married to John? We could only speculate, so we moved on to the genealogical library in neighboring Neodesha. There we again studied the 1880 census, this time for Coyville, and found Henry D. Carson, his wife, Julia Holcomb Carson, and their nine children, of whom 15-year-old Carrie was the fourth.

Next, we tried to get more information on Granddad's first marriage, to Dollie Pagett. Several agencies responded with the now familiar, "No record." One, however, added a note at the bottom of the page: "We have a record of a marriage of Dollie Pagett to William H. Davis, September 26, 1905, at Fort Logan."

Chapter Three

Untangling the Tangled Web

We came to the same conclusion simultaneously: "He changed his name!" This explained why there were no service records for Charles E. Wendel, and why we could find no mention of John Wendel except on Granddad's death certificate. We remembered that Granddad used to spin elaborate fabrications, with all the little details, and never an indication that it wasn't all gospel truth. This must have been his greatest hoax!

Later, in the State Historical Library in Topeka, we learned that Kansas took a State Census five years after each Federal count. This told us that in 1885, Carrie Davis was living at the home of her father, Henry Carson, in Coyville. Another member of the household was William Davis, aged one year, who had been born, not in San Francisco, but in Kansas! Another fib exposed!

Moving on to Coyville, we tried to find an "old-timer" who might have known the Carson family. We found Tom Row, well up in his eighties, living alone in a trailer behind his daughter's house. He greeted us cordially, and Sylvia came right to the point: "Did you ever know a family named Carson living around here?"

Tom smiled; his eyes twinkled. "Hank Carson!"

"That's the one!" said Sylvia excitedly.

"Hank Carson. We used to call him 'Uncle Hank.' He wasn't really my uncle; we just called him that. Lived over there on the next farm. Had a lot of kids. They were older than me, but I knew them well."

Tom proceeded to name the younger members of the Carson family, whom they married, and where they lived. He didn't remember Carrie, though.

"She must have been one of the older ones. But they all moved away; I don't know where they went. All except Charlie; he stayed and ran the store.

Now we ordered more service and pension records, this time for William Davis. And this time we got them! William had enlisted at Creston, Iowa, in 1901, giving his age as 21, instead of the correct 17. His birthplace was shown as Fall River, Kansas, and his next of kin was his mother, Carrie McIntier, of Fall River.

One of the documents in the pension file was a copy of the application for a license to marry Sylvia's mother. Here he identified his parents as Charles E. Wendel and Matilda Carlson, and stated that he had not been married before. There was a grain of truth to this: "Charles Wendel" had been in existence for only a year or two. It was William Davis who had married Dollie!

The most interesting record, however, was an affidavit that had been necessary before he could claim his pension. It stated that, "he is the identical Charles E. Wendel who enlisted

November 20, 1901, at Creston, Iowa, under the name of Wm. H. Davis." The reason given for the name change was, "Enlisted under assumed name on account of only 17 years of age and gave age as 21, having been refused enlistment several times on account of age and unable to get consent of his parents." Evidently the Pension Office accepted this explanation, because he got his pension.

Chapter Four

The Mystery Unravels

The name McIntier was new to us. Evidently Carrie's marriage to the senior William Davis had ended, either in death or divorce—but which? It made a difference, since this was Sylvia's grandfather. And how about the spelling of the name, "McIntier"? Was that correct, or was it a bureaucratic misspelling? We were determined to find out.

When the 1900 Census became available to the public, we visited National Archives in Seattle. With the help of the "Soundex" index, we located a James McIntire living in Middletown, the next village to Coyville, who had been married 13 years to his wife, Carrie, who was 34 and had been born in Iowa. All this seemed to indicate that this was the right Carrie. The eldest of the six children listed was William, age 15. This would have been Granddad, and the other children would be Sylvia's aunts and uncles.

The next time we visited Kansas, we found James and Carrie McIntire in the 1895 Census, but when we turned to the 1905 Census, they were not to be found anywhere in Wilson County. The Carsons, also, had disappeared and couldn't be located. Although we had no record of Julia Carson's death, we had learned from the "wedding booklet" that in 1900, Henry Carson had married Hattie Nicewater, of Muscatine, Iowa.

"I'll bet," Sylvia speculated, "that Hattie came to Kansas to marry Henry, didn't like it, and talked him into moving back to Iowa."

Another incident lent credence to this theory. On the same Kansas visit, we interviewed a lady who was living with her 103-year-old mother in Coyville. Although the older woman's mind was hazy, she did recall, in short periods of lucidity, attending school with some of the Carson girls. While we were there, she appeared to be dozing, but suddenly she spoke up: "Didn't they all move back to Iowa?"

We tried the McIntier name on Tom Row, and he smiled and twinkled again. "Yes, I remember Jim McIntier. He was an older man; used to come and see my dad. A practical joker, always playing the goose. No, I didn't know his kids. They went to Middletown School, and I went to Coyville."

The Kansas census gave us another valuable bit of information. Henry Carson had served in the Civil War, and his regiment and company were noted. This opened another door, and we sent for his military and pension records. When they arrived, we learned that he had, indeed, gone back to Iowa with Hattie, where he died in 1910. There was also a record of Julia's death in Coyville in 1897.

This mandated a trip to Iowa City and its Historical Library. It didn't take long to find a 1910 newspaper with Henry's obituary. Listed among the survivors were four daughters in Pittsburgh, Kansas. One of these was Sylvia's grandmother, Carrie!

Now the pieces of the puzzle were beginning to fit together. We still didn't know what happened to William Davis, Sr., and we didn't know whether Carrie had any living descendants, who would be Sylvia's close relatives. So it was off to Pittsburgh.

Lady Luck was with us now. Before we got to Pittsburgh, we stopped to rest at what had once been an inspection station along the highway. While I rested, Sylvia explored the deserted building. Amid the rubble she found a fairly recent Pittsburgh telephone directory. And there were three names spelled "McIntier!" One of them was Homer, a name that had appeared frequently in the Carson family.

Sylvia was becoming excited. This had to be a relative! But when we found Homer's address, it proved to be a vacant house. A neighbor gave us the address of Homer's brother, Leeman. It was just a few blocks away, and we walked up the steps together.

The man who answered our ring was Leeman, but he didn't appear old enough to be of our generation. Sylvia began with, "I'm working on my family tree, and I suspect I might be related to you."

"Yes?" Leeman was not impressed.

"What was your father's name?" she continued.

"Rodney."

"There wasn't any Rodney," I lamented. "It's just another blind alley."

"Just a minute," she persisted. "When was your father born?"

"1901." Leeman appeared a bit bored.

"See," she exulted, "He wouldn't have been on the 1900 census. Was there a Myrtle? An Edward? A Charles? A Thomas? A Mattie?"

"Yes," was his surprised reply to each question.

"Just how much do you know about your father's family?"

"Well, he had a half-brother who went out West and was never heard from again."

"Would you like to know what happened to him? Without waiting for an answer, she continued, "He was my father. You and I are first cousins!"

Now it was Leeman's turn to be excited. "Just a minute! Let me go and get my cousin, Naomi; she know more about this than I do. She lives just down the street. Sit down; I'll be right back. Don't go away!"

Sylvia beamed. The years of searching were finally bearing fruit. At last she had found a real flesh-and-blood cousin, and there were more to come!

Chapter Five

Family Reunion

Leeman soon returned with Naomi, who was Mattie McIntier's daughter, and more nearly our age than Leeman. We learned that Leeman's father, Rodney, was not only the youngest of the McIntiers, but that he had lived with his mother until her death and had not married until he was in his 40s. Since Granddad was 17 years older than his half-brother, Rodney, their children were practically a generation apart.

Naomi welcomed us warmly, and soon she and Sylvia were deep in conversation, with Sylvia striving to get answers to the myriad questions that had haunted her through the years.

"Grandma McIntier was my favorite grandma," said Naomi. "I knew my other grandma, too; she was nice but very proper and strict. Grandma McIntier was sweet and loving, and she always had cookies for us."

"You knew her well, then?" asked Sylvia.

"Oh, yes. She lived just down the street. She and her three sisters lived within a block of each other, each in her own house. I was always visiting her until she died in 1938."

"1938!" Sylvia almost cried. "I never knew any of my grandparents—never even knew Grandma McIntier was alive, and now I find she was living here until I was 21!"

"She used to tell me about Uncle Willie," Naomi continued. "He wrote to her from Denver that he had married, that jobs in Denver were scarce, and they were going to move to San Francisco. Then came the earthquake, and she never heard from him again. She assumed that he had died in the earthquake. I still have a jar of seashells that Uncle Willie gave Grandma when he came home from the Philippines."

"I wonder," mused Sylvia, "why he did it—why he broke all contact with his family—why he appeared in Billings with a different name and no wife. It doesn't make sense."

She changed the subject. "Whatever happened to my grandfather, Grandma's first husband? We couldn't find out anything about him except that he married Grandma in 1882, when she was about 17."

"Oh, that's quite a story! He took Grandma to a carnival—Uncle Willie was just a baby—and one of the barkers tried to talk him into going to a girlie sideshow. He wouldn't do it; said he had his wife and baby with him.

"'You'll forget your wife when you see our girls,' said the barker. 'She just can't match up to these.'

"Uncle Willie's dad must have considered that to be an insult to Grandma, so he pulled out his gun and shot the fellow. Dead! Then he ran and they never caught him. A couple of years later she was notified that he had been killed in a mine accident—I don't know where, but it was either here in Kansas or in West Virginia. That's when she married Grandpa McIntier."

A couple of hours passed while Sylvia and Naomi blissfully exchanged information. We had uncovered a great deal of Carson family history that was meaningful to Naomi and Leeman, while Sylvia was frantically copying everything she could about the McIntiers. Leeman and I just listened most of the time.

Finally Leeman spoke up, "Why don't we go over and see my brothers? They'd be happy to meet you. I'll call Homer."

He went to the phone, then looked up with a puzzled expression. "The phone is dead!" He looked out the window. "Hey, there's been a storm! There's a tree blown down across our phone line."

There had indeed been a storm, and we had missed it in the excitement of finding Sylvia's long-lost relatives. Tree leaves and branches littered the streets, and water still ran nearly curb-deep.

But now, with the sun smiling down again, we drove over to visit Leeman's brothers, Homer and Elmer, who also greeted their new-found cousin cordially and marveled at the wealth of family history we had accumulated.

After an hour of visiting, Naomi spoke up, "I'll bet Sylvia would like to meet Nettie and Tootsie. Why don't we drive over there and visit them?"

Leeman shook his head. "I'd like to, but I can't. I have to go to a funeral this afternoon. But it's a long way. Why don't you take my Cadillac; it's a lot more comfortable than that pickup camper."

"I haven't heard of Nettie and Tootsie," Sylvia cut in. "Who are they?"

"Mom's cousins," replied Naomi. "They're both widows, daughters of Grandma's sister, Mary Butler. They live about 50 miles north of here."

"Of course I'd like to meet them! Let's go. They'd be my dad's cousins, too."

We found Nettie at home. It wasn't hard to believe that Nettie and Granddad were cousins. The resemblance was striking. But Tootsie looked vaguely familiar, too. I wondered why.

"Johnny Carson!" I blurted out. "You look like Johnny Carson!"

"Tootsie didn't smile. I've heard that before. He's some relation of ours. I don't know how. Don't much care, either. We used to live in the same town back in Iowa."

This revived a suspicion we had had earlier, when we discovered that the entertainer had been born in the next town to the one in which Granddad had enlisted in the army, and that his father had been another Homer Carson. We hadn't been able to prove any connection with Sylvia's branch of the Carson family, so we gave up on that lead.

Chapter Six

The Search Ends—or Does It?

Sylvia was ecstatic as we drove back to Pittsburgh. After all those years of wondering and searching, she had met, in just one day, four genuine flesh-and-blood first cousins and two of her father's cousins!

We spent the night in our camper in Leeman's yard, and after breakfasting with him, headed westward toward home. We never learned any more about Granddad's mysterious life. Sylvia lived less than a year after that memorable day in Pittsburgh, and I haven't had the inspiration to pursue it alone. Perhaps some family member will take up the search and discover why Granddad changed his entire identity and cut off all contact with his family; what happened to his first wife, Dollie Pagett; how Langdon Smith fits into the family; and solve the other puzzles which are sure to surface in the course of the study.

GENEALOGY OF PERSONS MENTIONED IN THIS ACCOUNT

Henry D. Carson (1834-1910) (Old Granddad in Kansas)
Married: Julia Holcomb (1837-1897)
(9 children)
Married: Hattie Nicewander

Carrie Carson (1864-1938)
Married: William Davis, 1882
(1 child)
Married: James McIntier, 1887
(5 children)

Charlie Carson

Mary Carson Butler

(no descendants)

Nettie, Tootsie

William Davis, Jr. (Charles E. Wendel)
Married: Dolly Pagett, 1905
Married: S. Marie Isdahl, 1912

Mattie McIntier

Rodney McIntier

Sylvia Wendel
Married Bert Jahn

Naomi

Leeman, Homer, Elmer

EPILOGUE

While reading this account, you may have wondered, “Why didn’t they just look it up on the Internet?”

This story was written in the 1980s, and the research was done in the 1970s, before Al Gore invented the World Wide Web.

It’s amazing that with just a few clicks of the mouse, we can now find many of these records in databases published on the Internet. However, it must have been much more fun looking at the actual documents in library archives and meeting real people!

I have done a little searching on the Internet in an attempt to fill out the genealogy charted at the beginning of this story, but have come up with very little additional information.

- I did manage to trace the family of Granddad’s grandmother, Julia Holcomb, back several centuries.
- Lots of Carson family history is on the internet, including Johnny Carson’s family tree, but I haven’t found anything that connects to Granddad’s grandfather, Henry Carson.
- I’ve found no indication that Langdon Smith had a step-brother, or that Granddad had a step-brother. However, Langdon Smith’s bio is about as mysterious as Granddad’s, so who knows?
- I’ve found nothing about Dollie Pagett. My theory is that she and Willie went to San Francisco and she died there. Perhaps the 1910 Census will have a clue, but it’s not online yet.
- Sadly, I did find that Leeman McIntier died in 2005. He was my age, which explains why my parents thought he was too young to be in their generation.

I will be adding an updated chart as an addendum to this story. Meanwhile, the search goes on....

Carol Donnelly

(Granddad’s granddaughter)