

1. First Memories

By

Gary Wiggins

© 2018, rev. 2021

The woods behind Dink Morgan's house down the road from my Great-Grandad George Washington Dennis's place were enchanted, especially the spot where the sun shone through the trees onto the emerald-green moss. It was there that Shirley Devine and I shared moments of pure wonder when, as pre-schoolers, we explored the woods just outside Central City, Muhlenberg County, Kentucky.

My mother, Nellie Lee Bolton (Nell) was born in Small House, an unincorporated community that no longer exists in Ohio County, Kentucky. One of Ohio County's claims to fame is that Bill Monroe, the father of Bluegrass music, was born in the town of Rosine. Muhlenberg County also produced famous musicians, including country music star Merle Travis and Don Everly of the Everly Brothers.

After she and her first sister were born, Mom's parents, Heaverin Earl Bolton and Corrine Dennis, moved from Ohio County to Central City where Corrine's father, George, built a small house for them not far from his own home. The road led past the Devines, the Morgans, and the Boltons and on up the next hill to the Ralphs, a family that was to play a role in Mom's decision many years later to leave Central City forever. From the time of my mother's birth in 1920 until she was 17, the Boltons had five more children: William Paxton, Margaret Louise, Alberta Marie, Betty Joyce, and Edward Earl (nicknamed Dickie). Mom lived much of her teenage years in the farm home of her grandparents, George and Florence (Arbuckle) Dennis, where at the time also lived their daughter, my Aunt Seabay, and her husband, L. E. Jackson, and at least part of the time, Mom's brother, Bill Bolton.

Aunt Seabay Dennis had an unusual number of given names: Grace Juanita Seabay Sara Ellen and Oleta, as more or less confirmed in the 1910 US census, which lists her as Grace J. S. B. S. E. O. The story goes that the family members could not agree on a name for her when she was born, so Grandad Dennis said, "Aye, God, we'll just name her all of them!" Her husband, L E, on the other hand, had no given names, despite attempts on Ancestry.com to peg him as Lyman E., Leonard E., and even Harold E. Jackson. Aunt Seabay's brothers had more conventional names: Oakley (nicknamed Jack) and Zibe Washington Dennis, named for Florence Arbuckle's brother, Zibe William (the one who remained in Kentucky after brothers Seth B. and Elmore Vechel Arbuckle disappeared around 1898).

It took Mom a while to leave the security of Grandad Dennis's farm after quitting school at the end of the ninth grade, but she eventually moved to Owensboro, Kentucky, where she met my father, Dorman Elmo Wiggins. It was the custom at the time for girls to carry a small autograph book to dances and other events and have friends and acquaintances write in it. Shortly after they met, Dad wrote in her book, "Your future husband, Dorman Wiggins."

Dorman was born in 1919 in Beech Grove, McLean County, Kentucky, not far from Owensboro. His father was Orban Vance Wiggins, and his mother was Eura Lee Riggs. They lived on a farm, and by 1939, Dorman had left the farm and was driving a taxicab in Owensboro. Shortly after that date, he joined the Army Air Corps, with hopes of becoming a pilot. Central City was the place to which my mother, Nell Bolton, returned to re-join her extended maternal family when a few months after my birth on September 15, 1943, my father was re-assigned by the Army Air Corps to Florida. Nellie Lee Bolton and he were married in 1940, but from then until their divorce in 1945, they spent barely 6 months total living together, most of that time at Ft. Knox, Kentucky, my birthplace.

The Dennis family felt that an army base was not a proper environment in which to raise a child, so Mom decided not to go with Dad to Florida. After she moved back to Central City, the only extended time she and my father spent together was six weeks in Florida when she left me in South Carrolton, KY in the care of Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Jack (Oakley) Dennis and their 2 teenage sons Jackie and Billy.



Corrine, Jack, Juanita (Seabay), and Zibe Dennis

It was during her visit to Florida that she and Dad found a snake crawling up the wall of the room where they were staying. My dad was apparently deathly afraid of snakes. Supposedly, his father, Orban

Vance Wiggins, would grab snakes by the tail and kill them by snapping them like a bull whip. Unfortunately, one time he lost his grip, and the snake flew right around Dad's neck. It's understandable then that the sight of the snake in their room caused him to panic, jump into the middle of the bed, and cry for help. In Florida Mom learned what a good swimmer Dad was. He used to frighten her by staying underwater a long time, a skill he apparently learned while swimming in Green River as a youngster.

Mom's hair was always very curly, and she must have spent a lot of time in the sun in Florida. When she stepped off the bus, I recognized her and started calling her, but Aunt Elizabeth said, "Oh, no, Gary, that's not your momma. That's a little colored girl." Mom was short, a full 12" shorter than my father, who stood 6'4" tall. You get an idea that he would eventually be quite tall by looking at the long legs in the picture from his youth. While I always dreamed of making it to six feet, nature played a trick on me by putting my height at exactly 6" shorter than my dad's and 6" taller than my mom's.



The Young Dorman Wiggins

My Great-Aunt Juanita (Seabay) Dennis and her husband L E Jackson lived initially with her parents, George and Florence (whom we always called "Mammy"). Seabay and L E did not marry until she was nearly 28 years old. After they secretly married, it was her perceptive mother, Florence Dennis, who guessed it, and said, "Why don't you two sleep in the same bed? Don't you think it's about time?"

In fact, Seabay had several other boyfriends besides L E, including Paul Gregory. The Gregory family lived across the road from the 2-room house on 7 acres of land that Seabay and L E bought after World War II. The house is just up the road from Central City's Fairmount Cemetery. Although they made a nice nest for themselves there, they never had children. In effect, Seabay and L E became my second set of parents, especially during the first six years of my life that I spent in Central City. Of the two, Seabay was much the stronger-willed person, and it was her drive and independence that probably contributed to the conflicts between her and her father (and much silent anguish in her husband). The Arbuckle Scots flame always burned just beneath the surface in Aunt Seabay.

Whereas Seabay was a big talker, her husband, L E, was quite taciturn, and you had to be around him a lot to appreciate his deeper qualities, as well as his idiosyncrasies and his humor. Raised by his aunt and

Uncle, Lena and Leonard Earl Jackson after his mother died in childbirth, L E found a stable home in the Jackson household in Central City, which included his cousins Elizabeth and Billy. Billy Jackson was younger than L E, and he was the best friend of my uncle, William Paxton Bolton. To distinguish the two, the family always referred to one as “Bill Bolton” and the other as “Billy Jackson”. They had some wild times together, and L E once had to rescue Bill Bolton from the hands of the law in Indiana after one of their adventures. L E worked on Grandad Dennis’s farm and apparently lived there for a time even before he and Seabay were married.

Mom and Seabay were ten years apart in age, and before Seabay’s marriage, they double dated when Mom was old enough to go out with boys. Grandad Dennis never liked it when they dated, and they would sometimes slip out of the house after he went to sleep and return just before the roosters crowed in the early hours of the morning. He would then remark to them at breakfast, “Now, aren’t you glad you had a good night’s sleep rather than running around all night?”



Juanita Dennis and Nell Bolton

This then was the place where I spent the early years of my life and where my memories were first formed, either truly remembered by me or absorbed from the many re-tellings of various incidents in which I had been the central character. Some of those left indelible impressions, such as the time when my nose was nearly cut off by a disk, but other memories were shaped by the stories others told. An example of the latter is when as a toddler I once saved a chicken that had fallen into the slop bucket on the porch. Despite not being able to talk yet, I made Mammy aware that something was wrong outside when I tugged on her dress, pulling her toward the door. Another time a rooster jumped on me and flogged me to the ground. Fortunately, Mammy heard the ruckus and rescued me. The unlucky rooster found a place on the dinner table the next Sunday. But these were stories that I truly did not remember on my own. Nevertheless, my own early memories were quite vivid and stuck with me throughout my life, so I’ll share a few of them.

In the shed next to our house I found a real treasure—an elaborate uniform complete with braided epaulets and a sword. I was told that this belonged to Mike Poulos, a Greek emigrant, who settled in Central City and opened a popular restaurant. He was a good friend of Grandad Dennis. I imagined that Mike was a dashing soldier in the Greek army and was disappointed to learn later that this was a uniform he had to purchase to join a secret club in Central City.



Mike Poulos

I'm not sure what the secret club was, but Uncle Jack Dennis was apparently embarrassed at his induction into one such organization in Central City. At the time, flour could be purchased in large cloth sacks made of pretty printed material. Mammy would make clothes from the sacks, and she made a pair of underwear for Uncle Jack. Unbeknownst to him, part of the induction ceremony required him to drop his trousers, and sure enough, for all to see, there was emblazoned on his underwear "Pillsbury's Best".

My first comic book was also a lasting memory. Although I don't recall much of the story now, I remember that it had a western American Indian theme and involved a Gila monster. I almost drove my mom and Mammy crazy asking them to read me the story again and again. They tried at times to skip a page or two, but I always stopped them and forced them to read every word.

Another strong impression was formed in Dink Morgan's kitchen. It was bath night, and I wandered into the room just as Dink's overweight teenaged daughter, Ruby Nell, climbed into the wash tub. Everything was visible from the top of her head to her toes. I remember being very impressed with the two masses of flesh swinging from her chest and the black hair between her legs. I never told my mother about this.

I was the apple of Grandad Dennis's eye, and he would do just about anything I wanted him to, even playing the role of a horse by dragging a buggy around the barnyard with me in it. Mom told me that Mammy remarked to her when she saw her husband neighing in the yard, "If anyone sees George Dennis doing that, they'll think he has lost his mind!"

This was the same buggy that got turned around by the horse Old Dave when Grandad was taking me up the hill to town one day. We hadn't been gone but a minute when Mom saw us coming back into the lane. Grandad had given me the reins on the hill, and I pulled very hard on them causing Old Dave to rear up and turn the buggy completely around in the narrow road. Fortunately, it didn't overturn, and once we found a place to circle around in the yard, we headed back to town, where I knew bananas and fruit cocktail, my favorite treats, awaited me.

Old Dave may have been one of the culprits in a later accident that proved to be much more serious. Grandad had a hired hand, Amos, who was almost deaf. Amos finished disking a field and was bringing the team and disk back to the barn lot. The disk was being pulled behind a sled, and I hopped on the sled for a ride. When Amos reached the barn lot, he stopped the team to open the gate. Old Dave was very used to this routine, and as soon as the gate was open, he started up, just at the instant I decided to get off the sled. The lurch of the sled threw me under the disk, and I sustained a large gash that cut

into my nose, nearly severing the left side. Amos did not hear me yell, but Grandad Dennis did, and he rushed toward us, cursing as he came. "You son-of-bitch, Amos, I'm going to fire you!" I understood this to mean that Grandad was going to set Amos on fire, and I begged him not to do it. He didn't, and after several days in the hospital and quite a few stitches that left a noticeable scar on the left side of my nose, I returned to my great-grandparents' home to continue my life there.

It may have been Old Dave who formed another vivid impression in my young life. Whatever horse had gotten ill, Grandad Dennis called on Alfie Vincent to cure him. The cure was to bleed the animal, and I sneaked up to the barnyard to watch. I still cringe when I recall the blood that spurted from the punctured artery in the neck. It didn't take long for the horse to weaken and fall dying to the ground. I hurried back to the farmhouse, never mentioning what I had witnessed.

The next person to appear in my young life was a man who was to dominate it for the next twelve years and more--Everett Crowley, who became my stepfather shortly before my sixth birthday. Despite several suitors and boyfriends my mother saw after her divorce from Dorman Wiggins, no one found favor as a husband to her and father to me. The years rolled on and Nell probably still harbored a hope to once again leave the place that she thought she had left for good when she married Dorman. In the summer before my fifth birthday, she was introduced to Everett Crowley, the brother-in-law of one of the Ralph girls. Etolia Ralph was married to John Crowley, and on one visit to Central City, Mom met John's brother Everett.



Nell Bolton Wiggins and Everett Crowley in 1948

Everett Crowley was not a very tall man by today's standards (5' 8"), but very muscular at 165 pounds. The family learned that he had recently been divorced from his second wife after a bad horse-riding accident on their farm in Missouri left him with a broken leg that for a while forced him to wear a leg brace. When Grandad Dennis discovered that Mom had been seeing Everett, he vowed to put a stop to it. At this time, my great-grandfather was about 74 years old, but still had a lot of the old grit left in him

that was much respected in those parts. One day the two Crowley brothers and John Crowley's family pulled up in a car to pick up Mom and me. As I looked out the window of the car, I could see Grandad approaching Everett with a double-barreled shotgun pointed directly at him. Everett swung a hard right to Grandad's jaw, knocked him down, jumped in the car, and we drove off. This earned him lasting contempt in the Dennis family. For years no one in Central City would have anything to do with him except Zibe Dennis's wife, Daphnia, who was Etolia Ralph's sister. Witnessing this violent act shortly before my sixth birthday left me shocked that this could happen to my great-grandfather. As I soon learned, Everett was a man I would quickly get to know and fear, if not respect.



Everett Crowley about 1949

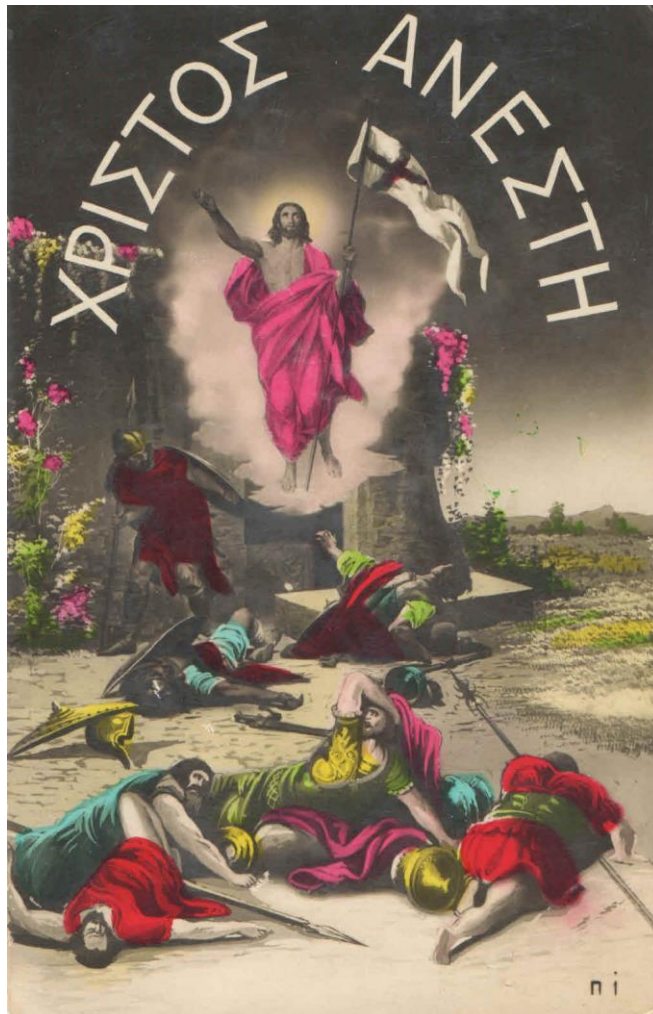
One of the few mementos I had that belonged to my real father was a cast-iron Sherman tank bank made in 1918, the year before his birth. Relatives would give me loose change, which I proudly added to the bank over the years. One dark night in 1949 after everyone had gone to sleep in the Dennis house, I was awakened by my mother, who told me to be very quiet because we were going on a secret trip. We walked up the hill along the narrow dirt road where Old Dave had pirouetted the buggy and eventually made it to the train station downtown. In the late 1940s the railroads ruled public transportation among cities and towns, and it was possible to board trains at several times of the day and night in Central City to travel to Louisville. The family had probably been careful to monitor Mom's movements and her money since the altercation between Everett Crowley and Grandad Dennis, but they had overlooked the stash of money in my tank bank. As we walked along the dirt road, Mom said, "I'm going to have to borrow your money, Gary, but momma will pay it back." The next day I had a stepfather, and a new chapter in my life began. In a strange sense, my real father had made it possible for Mom to flee to Indiana and start a new life in Charlestown by using the money in what was formerly his bank.

The people introduced in this first installment had interesting lives, and I will examine them in more depth in future chapters.

NOTES

A mild genealogical shock encountered when writing this chapter was the discovery that an “H. Cotton” was listed as Mom’s father on her second marriage record August 13, 1949 in Jeffersonville, Clark County, Indiana. I suppose her father’s true last name, “Bolton,” was misheard by the clerk who entered the name in the record. Her birth certificate shows her mother’s name as Chorine Dennis. My grandmother and Heaverin Bolton were married in Rockport, Spencer County, Indiana on May 5, 1919, a full eleven months before she was born. I was almost ready to believe the old saying from down home: “The first child can come anytime after a couple is married. It’s the rest of them that take 9 months.”

Postscript: Below is a scan of a postcard Mike Poulos sent in 1933 from Greece to a Mr. E. C. Mason in Central City in. The Greek “ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ ΑΝΕΣΤΗ” means “Christ is risen”.



The most recent version of this chapter, rev. 3/6/2021, is available on the web at:
<https://hoosierpewter.com/WBS/WBS-0001.pdf>