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Siblings find each other after 53 years

By PHOEBE KING
phoebe.king@lee.net

Part 1 of a two-part story

Little Rickie Webb was barely out of diapers when his entire world turned upside down. Up until then, he had a pretty idyllic life. He lived with his seven older brothers and mom and dad on an Army base in Northern California. His dad wasn't home very much because he ran transport missions for the military during World War II — before Rickie was even born — up through the Korean War.

Rickie's oldest brother, Larry, remembers having the run of the grounds at Fort Ord and playing sports and going fishing with their mom. Betty Webb was from Grass Valley, a small town north and a little east of Sacramento, nestled in the foothills of the Sierras. Larry says she was quite the outdoorswoman. She enjoyed deer hunting, fishing and riding horses and instilled in him an appreciation for nature. Overall, life was going pretty well for the young family.

In 1955, Master Sergeant Webb moved his entire family to an Army base in Kassel, Germany. A major center for German tank and airplane production during World War II, the city was bombed almost beyond recognition by Allied forces in 1943. It was liberated by U.S. troops April 3, 1945. More than 90 percent of the city's center was destroyed. Rebuilding efforts were well under way by the time the Webb clan arrived.

Larry remembers his dad being around more while they were stationed in Germany. They played softball together. Larry joined a Little League team that played among U.S. military bases. He says the nearest camp was 20 to 30 miles away.

Late that spring, Betty Webb learned she was pregnant. With seven boys, ranging in ages from almost 2 (Rickie) to 11 (Larry), Betty wanted a little girl more than just about anything. She got her wish. Debra Ann Webb was born Jan. 29, 1956, in a military vehicle rushing to get Betty to a hospital in Frankfurt, more than 90 miles away.

Tragedy strikes

Betty didn't survive the trip. Family accounts of the story are a little murky at this point.

Two of her children say that Betty was told by doctors before Rickie was born that she shouldn't have any more children. Larry says he doesn't recall his mother having medical problems from previous childbirths. Instead, he recounts a horrific tale of complications during labor that the medical facility in Kassel was not equipped to handle. Betty was loaded onto a truck and began a long, bumpy ride to the Frankfurt hospital.

But Baby Debra couldn't wait. She came into the world en route in the back of an Army green truck. Betty got to hold her before losing consciousness. Betty knew she had finally gotten her wish and had a little girl. But she was hemorrhaging wildly. The medic was unable to stop the bleeding. Still miles and miles away from a hospital with the tools and personnel that could save her life, Betty Webb died. She was 31.

Larry remembers his father coming home that night to break the news. The boys were all asleep, possibly dreaming about the new little brother or sister who would be coming home soon. Ray Webb woke them all and gathered them together to let them know they had a baby sister — and that their mother was never coming home again.

The younger children didn't understand. Rick, who was all of 2-and-a-half years old at the time, remembers continually asking his brothers when mom was coming back. "My brother Larry said, 'She died,' but I didn't know what that meant," Rick recounts. "Finally, he said, 'She's not coming back.'"

It was a sad, confusing time for the family. Rick says his father was devastated.

"After our mom died, he was hospitalized with depression for two to three weeks," says Rick. "We were kind of left by ourselves."

But he remembers Nanny Martha looking after them. "I can't believe I still remember her name," Rick says in an aside.

A million little pieces

With eight children to provide for, including a newborn, on a master sergeant's salary, and his wife newly deceased, Ray Webb was granted hardship leave.

First, he transported his wife's body back to Grass Valley for the funeral. Afterwards, he flew back to Germany and prepared to take the rest of his family home three to six months after Betty's death.

"We took the old DC-10 back to the U.S. with Dad," Rick remembers. They went to Ohio, Ray Webb's home state. He died in 1982. Describing the inner turmoil he must have experienced during that difficult time is not possible; one can only imagine.

Rick says they spent two or three weeks in Lancaster, Ohio, his father's hometown, an

agricultural center about 30 miles southeast of Columbus.

Then Ray packed up the family again and headed back to Fort Ord, touted as the most beautiful military base in the United States before it closed in 1994. Located in the Monterey Bay Peninsula just minutes from Carmel, the Pacific Ocean was visible from the west side of the camp. The coastal weapons ranges are now part of the California State Park system. And in 1956, it was once again home to the Webb family. But not for long.

Larry was in the hospital with pneumonia and the flu when four of his siblings were given up for adoption.

“It was the flu pandemic of 1957,” Larry recalls. “I was in the hospital for a week or two.”

When he got back to Fort Ord, still weak and a little out of sorts, he learned that Rickie, Ronnie, Gary and James were gone — and they weren’t coming back. He wouldn’t say much more about it.

Little Rickie Webb became Rick Gallagher that year. His adoptive parents could not have children, so they raised Rick as their own in Monterey County, Calif. His mother came from strong Italian roots, Rick says. Her family lived in Monterey and owned a company that took tourists on fishing expeditions in the Pacific.

“They were a very nice couple,” Rick says. He knew he was adopted, but didn’t recall much of his previous life. Rick says he kept having memories of sleeping in a blue car while on a long road trip. He had flashbacks of his brothers, but couldn’t remember who they were. He now knows that his brothers Gary and Ronnie were adopted at about the same time he was — to a different family.

Gary and his younger brother Ronnie were 9 and 8, respectively, when they were adopted by Melvin and Evelyn Janisch, a career Army couple like Betty and Ray Webb. Records show the adoption occurred in Monterey County.

Gary and Ronnie have a theory that all the couples who adopted the Webb children were known to Ray and Betty through military connections. Unfortunately, about 80 percent of military personnel records for those discharged from the Army between 1912 and 1960 were destroyed by fire in 1973 at a documentation center in St. Louis, so they may never know for sure.

Gary says he wound up in Wisconsin by way of Vietnam. He was injured in the war.

“Went up Hamburger Hill, was pinned up there for three days, got stabbed in the arm and took shrapnel in my back,” he explains. He has pins in his elbow from where it was

fractured. “But it’s alright, ‘cause it’s my shifting arm.”

Gary has been an over-the-road truck driver for almost 41 years.

His parents had a farm in Pardeeville, so when he was returned to the United States, they sent him to a Veterans Administration hospital in that area. His brother, Ronnie, lives in Baraboo, and Gary says he’s floated around between Portage, Baraboo and Mauston, where he lives now, for most of his adult life.

So, now it was just Ray and his three oldest sons, Larry, John and Terry. James had been placed in foster care before any of the other Webb children were adopted out. He currently lives in Sacramento, Calif.

When Ray was discharged from the Army, he moved back to Ohio with the boys. Larry says they were sent almost immediately to a children’s home, where he and his brothers lived for about three-and-a-half years. He remembers being in eighth grade when he moved in and in the 11th grade when he moved out. From there, they stayed with an aunt for a while.

Terry joined the Army when he turned 18. He was a popular basketball star for the Lancaster high school team and well-liked by grown-ups and peers alike. He was killed in Vietnam in 1968. Larry proudly points out that the local VFW is named in his brother’s honor: the Terry Webb Memorial VFW 1516.

Larry stayed in Lancaster and worked for a glass-manufacturing company for the next 38 years.

And little Debra Ann Webb was adopted by the Jorgensen family and grew up in a suburb of Minneapolis-St. Paul.

Like her siblings’ adoptive parents, her parents didn’t think they could have children, so they brought Deb home to raise as their own. Lo and behold, not too long afterward, Deb’s mom got pregnant, and they went on to have three children, two boys and another girl.

In essence, the Raymond and Betty Webb family ceased to exist after Betty died, and her children were scattered throughout the United States.

Rick has a yearning

A common thread that runs through the Webb siblings’ stories is a feeling that many adoptees experience at some point in their lives, a feeling of not fitting in.

“After I was adopted, I saw all these kids that were happy, and I couldn’t understand it,”

Rick says. “I wondered why I didn’t feel the same way.”

Because he was older when the family was split up, he remembered his brothers, memories like running around with some boys or riding in the blue car, but in a vague way, like he wasn’t sure it was real or if he dreamed it.

“I kept having these memories that I didn’t understand,” Rick says.

When he was about 9, his parents confirmed for him what he knew in his heart to be true — that he was adopted and had several brothers he could barely remember. They even told him his birth name.

Rick knew he would someday try to track down his half-forgotten siblings. Little did he know at the time that it would become a 19-year journey through microfilm rooms, public records searches and endless phone calls before he found them all.

Life continued to happen. Rick Gallagher got married when he was 26 to a woman named Sue. They’ve now been married for 29 years. They were living a quiet, uneventful life in Santa Rosa, Calif. Rick worked for the U.S. Postal Service. They had a couple of kids.

But Rick could not forget about his other family, the brothers and baby sister he was separated from so many years ago.

The search begins

Rick met somebody through his church who had tracked down a daughter — all the way to Norway — that she had given up for adoption when she was 16. His friend suggested that he start with his birth father’s death certificate.

Rick knew his birth father’s name and learned that he’d died in 1982 in Lancaster, Ohio.

“I searched for about nine months,” Rick says. This was in 1990, so the trail was pretty cold. He called the doctor named on his father’s death certificate, the man who ran the funeral home, the place where his father was buried, looking for a clue that would lead him to his siblings.

Finally, he connected with someone who knew the name Webb. The Webb family had a burial plot in Mt. Sterling. His paternal grandfather, Harry Webb, and his father were buried there.

Next, Rick began calling all the Webbs listed in Mt. Sterling, looking for another clue. Rick finally spoke with someone who told him he’d seen an obituary recently for a Jenny Strobe, sister of Ray Webb. Rick says he remembers thinking, “Oh, wow! I just missed meeting an aunt!”

Undeterred, he found the name of Jenny Strobe's daughter (Rick's cousin by birth) and finally got the names of two of his brothers: Larry and John Webb in Ohio.

About a month went by and based on his research, Rick says he had narrowed his focus to a particular area in Ohio — and started making phone calls. He dialed several wrong numbers before connecting with his brother Larry.

After so many rejections and wrong numbers, Rick was running out of hope. But he kept dialing and asking, "Are you related to Ray Webb?"

He finally heard a welcome "yes" from Larry Webb in Lancaster.

"I think I'm your brother," Rick said to the stranger on the other end of the phone, practically holding his breath.

"Which one?" Larry replied, and named Ronnie, Gary, James and Rickie. That was in 1991.

Meeting the family

"About two weeks later I came home to a message from my brother James in Sacramento," Rick says.

Just as if they've been talking every day all their lives, James says, "I hear you been looking for me."

Betty Webb's family in Grass Valley held a reunion that year. Betty's brother and sister, Rick's Uncle Pat and Aunt Eva, hosted what was to be the first of many such reunions over the next 19 years.

"That was pretty special," Rick says, "finally meeting blood relatives."

Four of the eight siblings were reunited — Larry, John, James and Rick, along with the aunt and uncle "and a bunch of first cousins."

Rick says the brothers from Ohio spent a couple of weeks in California. They came down to Santa Rosa and spent a few days with Rick. The three of them took a side trip to Fort Ord to look up records in hopes of finding their other missing siblings. They found a year book with names from 1955, Rick says, and wrote down the names of several members of their father's outfit. But none of them turned out to provide clues to the remaining Webb children.

So Rick kept plugging away. And now he had even more incentive to find the rest of his

siblings. But California adoption records might as well have been stored five stories below ground level at Fort Knox in an explosion-proof vault, for all the progress Rick was able to make over the next several years.

He was close to giving up many times. “I had run through everything I could,” Rick says. A people-searching group out of Grass Valley even petitioned the courts in 1995 to gain access to adoption records. The court said “no.”

Rick spent days upon weeks looking through public birth records in Monterey County. He found one for his brother Ronnie.

In 1998, thanks to the computer and a new-fangled thing called the World Wide Web, Rick located a woman online who said she could locate his brother from his brother’s birthdate. Rick forked over \$100 — he got a half off discount because he was looking for siblings — and gave her the information.

“Two days later I had their names, numbers and addresses in Wisconsin,” Rick says. And another round of reunions began. This time they met in Wisconsin Dells. Larry and John drove up from Ohio; Rick came in from South Dakota, where he and his wife have been living, and Gary and Ronnie were just a hop, skip and a jump away.

They shared pictures and stories and vowed to stay in touch. Rick was so grateful he persevered. Now if only he could track down his baby sister, Debra.

Return next Sunday for the rest of the story.

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