

FORWARD

All of us have things happen to us that are life changing. Unfortunately, sometimes these events are unforeseen and tragic. In my case, both of my parents died tragically within seven months of each other, and my sister and I were orphans.

Dealing with the death and absence of my parents has been a lifelong process, and I miss not having them around. One thing I have noticed, though, is that the provision and grace of my Creator has always been sufficient and timely to help me navigate through life's difficult journeys. I have never been alone. Family, however defined, is at the heart of God's plan for our well-being, even when part of that family is gone. People we encounter along our journey, whether they are friends, colleagues, or casual acquaintances, can make an enormous difference in our lives if we are open to it.

Some of the major events in my life that contributed to my transition from boy to young man include the camping and canoe trips with my Uncle Bud and Aunt Nancy and their boys to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness located on the U.S.-Canadian border in Minnesota, also known as the BWCAW, or simply, the Boundary Waters. The pristine beauty of this area is still relatively unchanged although the lodges and other businesses have modern conveniences for those visitors who do not want to experience so much raw wilderness. The wilderness, however, offers none of these conveniences.

When I returned to the Boundary Waters nearly thirty years after my earlier visits in the 1960s, I found it much the same as I remembered it. I was surprised to see many of the people and businesses still there from when I was younger. The present confirmed the existence of the past.

A friend of mine had a similar experience when he returned to the one-room school he attended as a boy in Iowa. During a trip there, he decided to go by the place where the school was to see if anything still existed after forty-five years. Although the building was overgrown and boarded, he found an old textbook in one of the desks that had his name written inside the front cover. It was validation that he had been there and had passed that way before.

Just as important as the events and places in our past are the people who left lasting impressions on us. I was surprised to see so many of the same folks I remember still living and working there.

My first goal in writing this book is to create something to read and enjoy because of the true stories of my journey from boy to young man. As I get older, I often hear my children, grandchildren, family members, and even friends comment about hearing stories “a million times!” There are often quiet, subtle, and almost unknown contributions from people or experiences that have forever touched our personality and way of being. Without these stories, our lives lose a dimension of richness and meaning. It is important that we pass our stories and experiences on to others, because these accounts help us remember our own history, and the people, places, and situations that have helped us become who we are and help us transition from boys to men and girls to women. In some sense, these stories are like bookmarks in our lives, holding a special place where we return every now and again for reference or just for the fun of remembering.

My second goal is to introduce you to a wonderful man named Rolf Skrien. He and his wife Gail are the inspiration for this book. I met Rolf during my first time at the Boundary Waters, and he was my canoe outfitter, employer,

and mentor. He is one of the people in my life who had a deep and lasting influence in my journey from boy to man.

Still a very unassuming man at ninety-one years old, Rolf has touched many lives because of his attitude toward life and work. He started his canoe outfitting business in 1956, and kept it for twenty years. He remembers the people and country as clearly as ever and still gets letters and visits from former customers. He still tells stories of the area and his experiences, and helps route my annual canoe trips. Because of his love of the wilderness and his commitment to sharing what he knows about it and instilling that love in others, he has successfully passed the baton to fellow travelers. It is my goal to pass the baton to others as well, just as I have shared my love of canoeing with my family and others.

Although parts of their stories are in several publications¹, it seems only fitting that someone write about Rolf and Gail in one book because of the way they have touched the lives of so many people over the years. Rolf is always thrilled to hear the stories of canoe trips from his former customers. He once said that he felt like a teacher contributing to the enjoyment of nature and helping people learn about the great outdoors. I want to pass along the same story, but in a way that lets the reader see the influence Rolf and Gail have had on my life.

I have consulted with many individuals in writing this book to ensure the accuracy of events and timeline so it is easy to see the connection and influence people like Rolf and Gail have had with their customers. The book is written in a first-person narrative format because tape recordings of original conversations from decades ago are not available and memories are not always reliable. I painstakingly

¹See Bibliography, in particular, books by Hunt, Webster, Muus, and The Women of the Gunflint Trail.

interviewed the sources of these stories to obtain the best possible recollections, and spent hours interviewing and tape recording Rolf to gather a compilation of his knowledge and recollections of this area. Capturing his experiences in this way has been an experience in itself.

Along with my own personal diaries, logs, additional research, and reading, most of the historical facts are accurate. I inserted certain details in places in the story where they most likely would have occurred or provided information to the reader to help develop an understanding. I have also included actual taped interviews with Rolf, and his stories are interwoven in the book at specific places to add his perspective.

My challenge to you as you read this story is to look for opportunities to share your story with others. What events have shaped the course of your life? What places have special meaning for you? Who are the people whose lives have made an indelible impression on yours?

We may never realize how much of a difference we make in someone's life. We may never see the healing that came through our hand to someone in pain from the hardships in their life. But we are never alone.

Enjoy our time together as we explore the Minnesota wilderness and remember to pass the baton.



- 1 Sea Gull Resort
- 2 Windigo Point/ Camp Windigo
- 3 Tibbetts/Roberts
- 4 Bloomberg
- 5 Wildwood Lodge
- 6 Skeien
- 7 Lammers
- 8 Carlson
- 9 Miles
- 10 Waters

- 11 Quiet Cove Resort
- 12 Henton
- 13 Diamond Willow Lodge/Sea Island Lodge
- 14 Bent's Sawmill
- 15 PYC Wilderness Canoe Base
- 16 Riststream
- 17 Eklund

- A Sea Gull (Wabooz) Creek
- B Meditation (Blanche) Lake
- C Tap Lake Portage
- D Eagle's Nest Island
- E Alpine River
- F Palisades
- G Sea Gull River

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Map of Sea Gull Lake showing key locations

CHAPTER 1 - THE CALL

I remember being in the living room when the phone rang. It was a gloomy day in Cleveland, Ohio, and it was 1966. The first signs of spring were evident as trees showed their buds and the daffodils had poked up from the ground. April was such a tease with these signs of spring all around, but the chilly, gray fingers of winter would not loosen their grip easily.

My sister, Diane, answered the phone. She was my older half sister, and became my guardian after Mom and Dad died. My mother had been married before and had two daughters, Diane and Linda. Diane was sixteen years older than I was and had just started a family with her husband, Don when she took my younger sister, Cindy and me to live with them after we were orphaned. Diane and I always got along well. She was supportive of most everything I did and I looked at her as a combination mother/sister, but mainly as a sister. She trusted me to make good choices, and I really appreciated that.

There was a brief pause, then the voice of recognition.

“Nancy! It’s great to hear your voice!” Diane said. “We’ve been just fine. Everyone’s healthy, and we’re all anxious for spring to really get here.”

I knew exactly who called. It was my Aunt Nancy. My father had two brothers, Bud and Tom, and this was Uncle Bud’s wife. Uncle Bud and Aunt Nancy had four boys: Ed, Dick, Bob, and Jim, and they were like brothers to me. She only called if there was bad news, or if they were headed our direction. That was always good news.

“I think that would very much be something he would like to do this summer. Would you like to speak to him?”

Diane called me to the phone, and said that Aunt Nancy wanted to speak to me. I quickly ran to the phone to see what she wanted. She invited me to go camping with their family to the Northwoods in northern Minnesota in June. She told me that to get to the Northwoods, we would travel from Chicago, Illinois to Duluth, Minnesota, then follow the north shore of Lake Superior to a town called Grand Marais. From Grand Marais, we would travel another sixty miles north on the Gunflint Trail to the end, and that was where we would be camping.

I was good with geography and had a general idea where Minnesota and Lake Superior were located. I tried to comprehend what she was saying and kept listening. She explained that their oldest son, Ed, could not go because of work and football. Her boys had taken a short three-day canoe trip last year, and they wanted to take another one this year, but they needed a fourth person. She asked if I would like to go.

I said I would love to go, and asked what I should bring. She told me to bring camping clothes, my fishing tackle, and pole. She explained that it was usually still chilly in June because the ice did not melt off the lakes until May. Warm clothes, including parkas and sweatshirts were important. Even though it was chilly, she said to bring a swimsuit in case we went swimming. I would also need personal toiletry items like a toothbrush, toothpaste, and deodorant. Since I was going in Ed's place, I could use his sea bag and sleeping bag, and share the tent with Dick. She mentioned someone named Rolf, the canoe outfitter at the end of the Gunflint Trail, who would rent us canoes and packs. I remember thinking that she was mispronouncing his name.

We finished our conversation, and I asked her how much money I would need. She said she would have her

boys send a letter and review everything. We could plan the trip and the menu and get an estimate of the cost. She thought sixty dollars would be enough. After we were done, she put the boys on the phone.

Their voices were faint as they gathered around the phone in the kitchen. It had a five-foot cord that was usually twisted and hooked on the receiver to the spin-dial wall unit. Dick told me years later that the original cord was much longer, but it kept being pulled out because everyone stretched it as far as possible to get into another room. After the third time it was broken, Uncle Bud found the shortest cord he could find and used that one to solve the problem. Dick said he did the same thing later after he got married and his daughters stretched and broke their phone cords.

Our conversation was lively, and included the usual gibes about who was going to catch the biggest fish and the most. Dick kept saying how beautiful and wild it was, and how you could drink right out of the lakes. This was nothing like the state park camping I had done with them. Bob told me how Rolf showed them an unnamed lake near their campsite that he called Little Northern. Apparently, there was no real portage to get to it, but they pushed back through the woods and had a blast catching Northern pike. I asked who “Ralph” was, and Bob corrected me, saying the man’s name was spelled R-O-L-F. I had never heard of that name.

Bob, usually the first to explain things, told me that Rolf and his wife, Gail, owned Way of the Wilderness canoe outfitting at the end of the Gunflint Trail. They rented canoes, paddles, tents, sleeping bags, packs, food, and anything else that might be needed for a canoe trip. You could be completely outfitted, or rent whatever you might need on a per-day basis. The boys described Rolf as “a real neat Norwegian guy with bushy eyebrows.” They added that

he and Gail were two of the nicest people. Nobody knew how long he had been up there, only that he seemed to know every nook and cranny of the wilderness.

We finished our phone call quickly because long-distance phone charges were a main budget concern in those days, especially for people with modest incomes. Dick was always good at following up details, and he promised to send a letter outlining the trip.

My mind was racing as I hung up the phone. Will I have enough time to get my money saved? Will I have to pay for a bus trip to Chicago, too? What will I tell my girlfriend? Where exactly is the Northwoods?

Diane's husband, Don, had the road atlas in his car, and he frequently had to work late at the YMCA. I decided to ride down to the gas station and see if they had a Minnesota road map. In those days, you could get free road maps at the local service stations, and they usually included surrounding states. I thought I remembered the Gulf station having a Midwestern United States map, so I jumped on my bicycle and went down to look. I had been to the Gulf station many times to put air in my bike tires or to buy a bottle of pop. They were closing as I got there, but I pushed the door open and went to the map section, where I found that I was right. There was a map that included Wisconsin, Illinois, and Minnesota. I grabbed it, and headed home. I could not wait to look at it and figure out where we were going.

When I got home, Diane watched as I spread out the map on the dining room table to see exactly where we were going. I located Duluth, Minnesota, and then followed the north shore of Lake Superior until I found Grand Marais. There was only one road heading north from Grand Marais. That must be the Gunflint Trail, I surmised. It ended in what looked like a massive matrix of inter-connected lakes.

"I guess this is where we're going," I said, pointing to the northeastern portion of Minnesota along the Canadian border.

Diane looked at the map with me and mentioned that Aunt Nancy and the boys seemed to have a great time camping there for the last two years. I supposed I would ride a Greyhound bus to get there, but I was surprised to hear Diane say that I might be able to fly. The Head Office for the YMCA was in Chicago, and Don was able to get special passes to fly sometimes. She said she would talk to him when he got home.

I folded the map and ran upstairs to the third floor where my bedroom was, trying to remember how much money I had already saved from caddying. My snow shoveling money was gone, and I had just started the caddying season. I only had a few dollars, so I hoped the weather would cooperate, and I could make enough before June.

With every passing day, I tried to imagine what this canoe trip in the Northwoods would be like. It certainly sounded like the type of adventure every boy dreams about, and I hoped that the actual event would surpass the thrill of looking forward to it.

The time went by quickly with baseball season at the end of the school year and other things that happen the last three weeks of school. Weekends worked out perfectly, and I was able to caddy enough to raise money for the trip.

ON THE WAY

I was able to fly to Chicago when the time came, and I was very excited to fly alone as a fourteen-year-old boy. I heard that Chicago's O'Hare Airport was the busiest in the

world, and I worried a little about my family being able to find me. I thought about seeing Aunt Nancy, Uncle Bud, Ed, Dick, Bob, and Jim. We had so much fun over the years, although I saw them less when they moved to Chicago. I actually saw them more frequently after Mom and Dad died. I would see them in the summer, and we spent time together because of the visits for funerals. This time was different, though. This was going to be a blast. I wondered if we were going to get the opportunity to stop at that new hamburger joint in Chicago. I really liked their French fries and milkshakes. I wondered how many hamburgers they had served.

When I got off the plane, Uncle Bud was waiting for me. His real name was Forrest, after his father and my grandfather. He came from work because it was closer to pick me up on his way home. Uncle Bud was about five feet ten inches, with blue eyes and thinning brown hair that showed gray streaks. He wore blue work trousers and a short-sleeved blue work shirt that matched. He always had the top button open, showing the upper portions of his hairy chest. He was very strong because he had worked in gas stations and did electrical wiring for Pullman cars at the railroad. He always had a big smile, and he greeted me with a hearty handshake.

"How are you doing, little Bill?" he said in a raspy voice.

I was named William M. Sanderson II after my father. Some family members called me Willy, but I preferred Bill, and Uncle Bud respected that. Uncle Bud was a kind but tough man. He loved to laugh and play cards, and he loved a cold bottle of beer. He had come to Chicago to learn the hydraulics business from a man he had known in Columbus, Ohio. The hydraulics business was okay for him. He made a living to support his family, and did on-site repairs for large customers. It was limited income, and

required getting your hands dirty, doing design work, and troubleshooting. Raising four boys required money, but he did what he had to do to make it work.

Looking back, I think Uncle Bud worried about his family. The year before my dad died, their youngest brother, Tom, died of kidney disease. He left a wife and four children in an orphanage in Chicago. After my dad's death, Uncle Bud was the only brother left. With his own family's needs, there was little that he could do financially, but he always gave emotional support.

Uncle Bud broke my train of thoughts, and asked me if I was ready to do some fishing. I assured him I was.

"Where we're going, we'll definitely catch some fish," he said. "I just hope I leave enough fish in the lake for you and the boys to catch a couple."

"That's funny, I said. "Dick said the same thing. I guess I'll need to show you both up."

We had a good laugh and continued the visit all the way to their house. We talked about all kinds of things, but always seemed to come back to our camping trip. Like many Americans at that time, we went camping for vacation because that was all we could afford to do. The previous trips with my cousins had included camping, fishing, and swimming, but I kept trying to imagine what this new place with the great fishing would be like.

It seemed to take forever to get out of Chicago and out North Avenue to Wheaten where they lived. We finally pulled into the driveway, and I saw Dick and Bob packing the sixteen-foot aluminum fishing boat with the camping gear. I jumped out of the car and yelled hello. They returned the hello in unison.

Dick met me first. He wore blue jeans and a light blue denim shirt hanging loose out of his pants, and had on dirty and worn white tennis shoes. Dick was sixteen and a half at the time, and stood five feet and seven inches tall with curly brown hair. He was as strong as an ox because he played football and wrestled, and his arms were solid muscle with wrists that were like vice grips. He had a vertical forehead crease that deepened when he was concentrating on something, and it separated his deep blue eyes. Some people develop forehead creases because they frown in anger, and some get creases because of intense concentration. His was the latter.

Dick was not afraid of anything, although he occasionally complained about his back. He had a habit of jumping off garages when he was a kid. I also remembered the time he talked some of his friends into bending over a twenty-foot tree and launching him through the air to see if he could land in a tree twenty-five feet away. The launch was five-feet short of its destination. All we heard was the sound of tree limbs breaking before Dick hit the ground with a thud.

Bob greeted me next. He was fifteen years old, and came right behind Dick. He wore blue jeans, too, with a short-sleeved Banlon shirt that showed his arm muscles. His shirt was tucked, and his tennis shoes were not quite as dirty as Dick's. Bob was about five feet nine inches tall and was a gymnast so he had a triangular upper torso. He was very strong, and had the same deep blue eyes common to all the Sandersons. His brown hair had a blonde streak that went through the front portion of his bangs. I always asked if he colored it, but he claimed it was natural. Bob's wrinkles were around his mouth formed from smiling. He was a little quieter than his brothers were. Maybe it was because he was stung nearly one-hundred times when we were younger and

rolled down the ravine and over a bee's nest at their house. He was the only one of us who rolled over the nest.

We all shook hands, greeted each other with smiles, and Dick grabbed my suitcase from the car.

"We need to get rid of this suitcase and put your gear in a sea bag like the rest of us," said Dick. "Let's go inside and get this changed out."

As soon as we got to the door, Aunt Nancy greeted me with a big smile and a hug, and made me feel at home by telling me to get cracking on switching my stuff to a sea bag, because she wanted to get on the road within the next hour.

Aunt Nancy was quite a character. She was about five feet seven inches tall, well endowed, and had auburn hair with freckles. She had gained weight since her days of diving as a teenager. Aunt Nancy came from a family of means. Her grandfather was Edward S. Matthias and he was elected to the Ohio Supreme Court and served for thirty-nine years. She was a rebel and did things her way. She loved to laugh, play cards, visit with family and friends, and was the source of many practical jokes over the years, and most of the time, she was the one who would start something. I always felt like one of the boys with her, and she made me feel like I fit in.

My youngest cousin, Jim, came from around the corner and said hello in a squeaky voice. Jim was thirteen, but had not yet developed physically like his older brothers. His voice had not changed yet. He was strong because he was a wrestler, and his blue eyes and wavy brown hair were his best features. As he got older, he had a remarkable likeness to Michael Landon. The shortest of the boys, he was only about five feet four inches tall, but grew a few more inches and filled out later in life. Jim loved to tease and loved to play pranks and he was just plain ornery. He asked about

my trip, and I told him flying was fun, especially the take-off and landing.

When I got to the kitchen, Ed came around the corner and with a big smile, said hello, and gave me a big hug. Ed was the biggest of the cousins. He was five-feet eleven inches and weighed over two hundred pounds. He had a round face with blue eyes and short brown hair, neatly combed to the side. He played center on the football team, bass fiddle in a folk group, and did not look as muscular, but he was certainly strong in his own right.

Ed was always ready with a one-liner or a humorous story. He made me feel welcome, and today was no exception. He asked me about my flight, and then pointed out the hamburger and fixings he saved for me for dinner. As he told me to eat, he said I was going to love the Northwoods, and told this story.