

I was born March 1, 1923, on a Thursday about 3 PM to Bessie Binaugh Webb and Robert Lofton Dillon, in my grandparent's home in Rudy, Arkansas, Crawford County. My Dad left early on, moved to Oregon where he became a chef. His sister, Aunt Em Peters (Opal's mom) kept me informed all those years and vice versa. I finally met him in Forest Grove, Oregon in August of 1965.

My Grandmother Webb named me, from a book she was reading. No middle name, as all Mother could think of was Fae, May or Marie and didn't care for any of them. However I liked Wandafae and signed it that way starting in high school and continuing on through Lockheed days in Burbank, California in the forties.

We lived at Papa and Mama Webbs' for years and then Mother, Gene and I moved down the road to a house she'd bought from her brother Grover for four hundred dollars. It had two big rooms, one little room, a back porch, and a large front porch. We lived there until September 29, 1927. It was across the road from Marvin and Sally Breashears' and their two daughters, Harie and Thelma.

My first memory was when I was between three and three and a half years old. I was very ill with a kidney problem. Mother was rocking me in front of the fireplace at Mama Webbs. I was feverish and crying and being carried around on a pillow. I kept seeing 'monsters' in the fire. The doctor said pus kidney¹?

Another vivid memory was being stung by wasps at our neighbors, the Breashears, across the road. Their daughter and I were chasing each other around the house and had disturbed their nest, OUCH!

Gene went to school a half a block away from our little home and on September 29, 1927, a tornado² came sweeping down Cedar Creek and up over the railroad track directly toward the lovely two story home of our grandparents, Mama and Papa Webb. The house sat up on the side of the hill overlooking our sleepy town of Rudy, Arkansas. The large front window of Papa Webb's house had been broken out and our Uncle Wilbur Webb had just told Papa that a new window should be installed before a strong wind comes up and blows the top of the house off. Papa said that he might as well measure the window while he was thinking about it. When he went to measure it he looked out and saw the tornado coming toward the house. His first thought was, "there goes the top of my house".

¹ The term refers to a renal abscess and is a pocket of pus that develops in the kidney tissue. It results from the migration of bacteria from another infection site on the body to the kidneys.

² One of 15 significant tornadoes that struck that day in the central US. This one was an F2, 100 yd. wide, that traveled 7 miles in Crawford County, AR. "Tornado damaged or destroyed 30 homes and a school, the latter of which partly collapsed, injuring five students out of 106. Cultivated and forested lands were heavily damaged. 20 people were injured and losses totaled \$75,000."

All of a sudden the tornado made a sharp turn to the right and wiped out two rooms of the four room school house, and then totally demolished our home (with mother and me in it), along with the Marvin Breashears' home across from ours, Uncle Ed's next to the school, Mrs. Ernest's and Marvin Grahams' homes on either side of ours, the Pitmans' home a block behind ours next to the hill, the Rudy Baptist Church, and the Railroad Section House across from Bryan's (who lived next to the railroad).

The school house was L shaped and two stories high. My brother Gene was in the lower room of the side of the building that was destroyed when the tornado hit. Torrents of rain were falling by this time and all of a sudden the daylight faded and it became very dark. Just then Gene's teacher, Marjorie Carney, told the students to follow her to the back of the room and into the next room where the older students were but they didn't make it. (At that time Gene was nine years old and I was four and a half). I am sure the teacher's action saved the lives of my brother and the other students due to what happened then. The upper and lower walls of these rooms were whisked away and desks were flying around like feathers, one of them knocking my brother down as he was trying to protect his head from being hit. He sprang to his feet just as the wall blew out. He instantly dove through the opening and one side of the floor above came crashing down, hitting right where he and others had been just seconds before. Gene was the first one out of the building. His school desk was at the front of the room so that he was at the back end of the line when they started marching toward the back of the room. The other students and the teacher made it to the back of the room where the flooring of the room above stayed propped up and protected them as the high school students on the second floor above came sliding down the inclined floor.

Gene landed on his feet running, ran around the school building, and ran between the building and a fence, which was about twelve feet from the building. As he ran the half a block to the corner of our street Gene said he felt as though he were dreaming. He kept trying to run, but was being held back. By this time Papa Webb was running down the road toward where our house was supposed to be and he saw Gene running and being chased by the top of a house that was rolling along behind him, so close that it looked as though the corners of the roof would hit his heels. Papa said that a race horse could not have caught him. As Gene ran he could see that our home and all the surrounding homes were gone. He kept running and turned the corner towards Papa Webb's house, a block away. He ran up the steps into the house and found Mama Webb had been ironing. She had just stopped because it had turned so dark out that she couldn't see. Gene saw that she was alone and started crying so hard that she could not make out what he was trying to say to her. He was asking where his mother and sister were. Mama Webb didn't even know there had been a tornado. Gene finally got her to look out of the window. When she saw that buildings were down she and Gene ran to look through the rubble trying to find us. One house, belonging to Mrs. Sloan was intact but had been pushed back several feet. People were looking for mother and me. Someone asked if we were in their home and were told that we were not. The search continued. Some thirty minutes later,

Mother, Jess Helton and Papa Webb came walking up the road towards Papa Webb's house. When Gene saw Mother at first he didn't know her because she was covered from head to foot with mud and blood. Mother's hair at the time was waist length and Gene said that it was a sight to see. Mother and I were both injured; mother had the most serious injuries. Her forehead was cut above one eye, the inside of the left arm near the elbow had a cut, and one foot was cut from one side of the ankle to the other, with bone and ligaments showing, no flesh in between. She spent some time in bed and used crutches for many months after.

Mother told Gene that when she finally realized how strong the wind was, she placed me (her baby girl) on a feather mattress she'd just brought in from airing. She said she threw the feather mattress on the floor, placed me on it, and braced her back against the front door to try to keep it from blowing open. That's where we were when everything was demolished. There was nothing left of the house but splinters. Mother later told Gene that when she came to, she started looking for her baby. After she'd been looking for a while she heard a little cry and found me under a tangled wire fence with some splintered wood over me. After digging me out she went to the one remaining house and was helped in through the window because the doors could not be opened. All I remember was a heavy coat being placed around my shoulders.

Marvin Graham was looking for his wife and baby girl, Bobbie Jean. They were found wandering around and the baby was still wrapped in her blanket. Sally Breashears said all she had left was a wash kettle and an ax. We had absolutely nothing other than the torn clothing on our backs. Gene had worked hard and earned enough money to buy a pair of shoes for school. He only had one shoe left. I had on a pair of black bloomers and a cute little yellow dress with a crocheted top. It had a girl and boy embroidered on it in black. Aunt Babe had made it for me. All they ever found of Mother's was part of a feather bed that was up in a tree and a letter that was carried by the wind, intact and unharmed, for many miles to Boxley, Arkansas, in Newton County. A hunter had found it and given it to his sister, Lou Edgeman. She returned it to my Mother. The letter was written by Edgar Bradley. Mrs. Edgeman said she lived so far away that she'd never seen a train. She and Mother corresponded for many years but never met.

Sometimes in tragedy there is also humor. Sally Breashears had a record player. Marvin her husband worked in a local grocery store. When he noticed the storm coming up he said, "I'm not scared, but I think I'd better go home". After the storm had passed the record player was found a short distance away. It had a record on it and the player was still turning. The name of the record was "I wasn't scared, but I thought I'd better go".

It stormed and thundered for weeks after, but Papa Webb wouldn't leave Mother to go downstairs where it was safer as it was constructed of cut stone. The Red Cross came in and gave us some lumber but it wasn't enough to rebuild the house.

A new school, grades 1-9, was built upon the most elevated site in Rudy with a three acre campus adjoining it. It had the most modern school buildings in Crawford County and the best

rural school buildings in the state. It opened on August 19, 1929, almost two years after the tornado. They had continued classes in the lower level of the old school. It served as school rooms and a lodge.

My favorite teachers in those years were Ruth Wolford Miller and Reverend John M. Basinger, who was not only my teacher and principal, but also my minister at the Baptist Church in Rudy for sixteen years.

In September of 1929 Mother went to work for the Frisco Railroad as a cook on the boarding cars where the men, working on the section, lived. They replaced the railroad ties, checked and reset the distance between rails, and repaired bridges, etc. She worked with Mrs. Flood, one of the men's wives. The job took them thru Oklahoma, Missouri and Arkansas.

During this time, while they were stationed at Lancaster, Arkansas, Gene and I rode the #12 train up to see mother. We stayed the day and then walked back home along the railroad. Mother and a friend walked part of the way with us. We thought this was so neat. Once we had to get underneath a trestle while a train passed over. I wasn't really scared, because my big brother would protect me, him being four and a half years older you see. Mother came home to Rudy to stay on December 19, 1931.

I never remember Gene and I fighting or any jealousy between us as a youngster. He could do no wrong! I used to tease him and follow him everywhere. Oh, I'm sure he could have wrung my neck many times. One example, he had a nail on a magnet and was throwing it at the floor. I kept sticking my foot out as he did so and he told me over and over "sis, I may hit your foot". Not my brother! What happened served me right. He made a direct hit on my right big toe. I ran screaming around the house, with him and Mother right behind me. That convinced me and I NEVER did that again! I even felt sorry for my poor brother! He was so scared!

The family had a hard time keeping me out of trees! I loved to climb. I'd climb the sweet gum (liquid amber) trees and go as high as I dared to and calling "Mother look at me". I'd jump out of the second story of the barn onto a haystack too. That sure was fun; I was such a tomboy.

I rode Papa Webb's two horses, Pet and Bird, occasionally even bare back. Pet bucked me off once and it made me so angry that I got right back on and off we went again! I guess I showed HER who was in charge!

Girl friends and I played house a lot. We also played church, and guess who was always the preacher? Wanda. Opal Mae Carney, Cecil Pitman, and Thelma Breashears were my playmates. Opal Mae married a Pentecostal minister years later. My desire then was to be a missionary. Now THAT must have been before I got too interested in boys. Then, all I ever wanted was to be married, have babies and dance.

The only recreation we had growing up was swimming in the creeks and our favorite spot was the Wash Hole, about a half mile above Papa Webb's house. We used to swing out across the water, to the deepest spot, on a rope that was tied to a tree, and then let go. Then we'd swim back to the bank and do it all over again. I also jumped off the high diving board, always holding my nose. I was never afraid of the water, but never learned how to breathe correctly.

A lot centered around the church and Sunday School and the BYPU (Baptist Young People's Union) in the evenings. We had parties in each other's homes or in the church basement. The games I remember most were Spin the Bottle, and Musical Chairs. I usually missed the chair.

Mother and I would walk down the road to Mrs. Pitman's house and Cecile and I would walk on to church alone. Sometimes a boy would walk us back to Cecile's.

Very few of the boys had cars and if one did we would all go somewhere together. To a movie in Van Buren, or skating which I never learned to do well, and we were learning to dance. Two cousins of mine, Pauline Young (Aunt Nona's girl) and Tommy Webb (Uncle Ed's boy), taught me. We had dances at the Boy Scout Camp above Rudy, in the 81 district. It would be so cold three or four of the girls would sleep together to stay warm, usually at my house.