

CHAPTER IV

TAKING ROOT

When I was a youth, I dreamed of going to California. I would be riding in a covered wagon, drawn by six horses and loaded with supplied and household goods. The bottom of the wagon box was gently curved and covered with canvas to keep out sun, rain, and dust. All around me were striking and graceful vehicles moving over the hills, past Indians who waved at me.

Our actual arrival in California was less romantic. A steady stream of automobiles bore witness to the changes which had occurred since, as a young boy, I had read about the Wild West.

My first position in Los Angeles was with the Fluor Corporation, a company of engineers and constructors. After a few months of field experience in a refinery, I became a planning engineer. My responsibilities were limited at first and I was encouraged to attend a variety of lectures at East Los Angeles Junior College dealing with engineering as well as management subjects.

Life seemed easy and full of hope. I bought a house in Long Beach and planted the trees which were to bear fruit in the years to come. Little did I know then that I would never see their fruit.

It seemed like a good time to enroll in some course study leading to a master's degree. I was accepted at Long Beach State College in 1954 and started my first year. My employers had other ideas. Since I spoke French and had appreciable work experience in Canada, they assigned me to a refinery construction project in Montreal, Canada. Of all places, there I was again, the car buried under twelve feet of snow, and the orange groves three thousand miles away.

My new position was, however, a real challenge and I had a lot of growing up in the next year-and-a-half. I assumed a number of different responsibilities besides my regular engineering duties. I set up a material control section, looked after petty cash, assisted our field purchasing department, and acted as interpreter.

We had a few rather unusual personnel problems, particularly those caused by bi-lingual and cultural problems peculiar to Quebec. Americans were regarded with some distrust and envy because of their general unwillingness to learn French and their conspicuously higher economic status. I believe I was instrumental in bringing about a great improvement in the working relationship between the two different cultural groups; an experience of no little value at a later date when I was sent on a project in Texas.

While my post-graduate education in Long Beach had been interrupted, I did manage to take some evening classes given in French at the Montreal Technical Institute.

In summer of 1956 I prepared myself for my return to California. My sons had been attending school in Montreal and enjoyed their sojourn in Canada, but they were anxious to return to their home. Just then some unexpected and unforeseen problems occurred on a construction job in Minnesota and my company asked me to spend a few months there.

My temporary assignment did not seem to be of more than routine nature. I worked as a civil engineer under the direction of a very young, somewhat arrogant, but very capable resident engineer. At first, I did not think much of his frequent requests to deal with the staff of the field design engineering office, but gradually I found out the real reason for my assignment. The field design engineering office did not get along with the resident engineer and simply resorted to deal with him. I was a sort of buffer between them and had been chosen because of my proven ability to get along with people under very trying circumstances.

My wife was not in very good health and we all felt disappointed when, at the end of my assignment in Minnesota, my company asked me to postpone my return to California and accept yet one other assignment. This time it was in a hot, humid bayou area of southeastern Texas near Galveston. My assignment was essentially one dealing with company-employee relationships and sub-contract administration. All well as far as my work was concerned, but I found it very difficult to live in a state practicing segregation. My sons did quite understand why it was necessary to have two

drinking fountains, one marked "white" and one "colored." And I was not willing to live in a setting of racial discrimination so reminiscent of my earlier life under Hitler.

When the Fluor Corporation failed to act upon my request to permit my return to the Head Office in Los Angeles, I quit.

I had three interviews in Houston, Texas. One with Kaiser Engineers, one with the H. K. Fergusen Company, and one with the Bechtel Corporation in San Francisco. I received offers from all of them, but decided on Bechtel as the company having the best prospects for the future.

On January 5, 1957, I reported for work in Bechtel's San Francisco office and began a love affair with this beautiful city which has never ended. I had reached another turning point in my life.