

The Two Bills

© 2013, 2019 Vernon Miles Kerr



It's 3:00 three o'clock. I can't sleep. The refrigerator is making an oscillating hum. My overstuffed chair is augmented with a headrest of pillows just in case I fall asleep at the wheel, or keyboard, in this case. What flashes into my mind? Ontario, California. Funny, I only lived there ten years but those must have been very formative years because it looms so large in my brain's process of prioritizing images and memories. I lived there from summer of 1952 to summer of 1962. Nine years old when I arrived, and nineteen when I left. I was thinking today about my best friends while there. The first friend, I met the first day in Ontario and the second on the first day of school, that Fall—and both are still close family friends, nearly 70 years later. It has to be that dual link to the past that gives those ten years in Ontario such significance for me. The two Bills. One my neighbor, across the street, the other my classmate at school.



I was thinking today, that the key to such longevity wasn't just being friends with each of them. It was being a part of their families.

When we first moved into our house in Ontario, across the street and down one house lived the Silverthorne family. There was a boy my age, Billy, and two brothers roughly the same age as

my two younger brothers. It was Billy, Brian and Donnie Silverthorne. Verny, Stevie and Ronny Kerr.

During my first day at school in Ontario that fall, I seemed to have bonded immediately with another Bill—Bill Short. For some reason, Bill Silverthorne was in the other 4th grade class and was always in a different "track" from my own until we finally got to Junior High. After class, Bill Short and I were hanging out doing what kids called "goofing around," and

here came Bill's mom, Eileen, walking a cute little black and tan "wienerdog," as we kids called Dachshunds . The dog was just a puppy, but she seemed to be at home on that leash. Her name was Duchess, or I learned later, usually just "Dutch." I'm pretty sure Dutch was still a member of the Short family when ours moved up the coast to Santa Maria in 1962.

The Shorts were partners in a Kelly Tire shop in Ontario, and the Silverthornes owned a pharmacy in adjoining Upland, CA. The Short family had been around Ontario since the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. The Silverthornes had immigrated to Los Angeles from Alberta, Canada just one generation before.



Grandpa Alec Silverthorne owned an auto auction firm in L.A., about a forty-minute ride down the freeway. His car lot was right next door to the Shrine Auditorium . Whenever I see the Academy Awards or some other televised event coming from the Shrine Auditorium I'm immediately brought back to those days when Bill Silverthorne and I would hang around the auction house and listen to the chatter going on between the flow of used car dealers, Black and Hispanic detail-men and Bill's uncle Jack and grandpa. My mind's eye is seeing guys huddled together riffling through the pages of the Kelley Bluebook and my mind's nose is smelling the dripped oil and mustiness of used cars.



There were a few times we went into L.A. to Silverthorne's Auto Auction to pick up goodies that Grandpa or Uncle Jack had set aside for Bill or his family. One was his first car, a used 1951 MG TD. A dangerous little sucker, which I will explain later.

Okay—yeah, we had a wreck in it, eventually, but not until it had carried the two of us around Southern California for a while, from Mt. Baldy to San Diego and all points in between. After Bill had pounded out the dings and repainted her a beautiful metallic "Scarab Blue," making her better than ever, she carried us on many other adventures.

One thing we would do in the little "TD," is take off on a Saturday and flip a coin at every major intersection: if "heads" came up, it was a right turn and "tails" was a left one. Hmm, I wonder what indicated "go straight ahead?" Maybe that was when the coin fell onto the wooden floorboards. Anyway, this method resulted in our winding up in some

interesting nooks and crannies of Southern California, including San Diego, very late in the afternoon one day, resulting in some very panicked Silverthorne and Kerr parents, exchanging worried phone calls between households and pacing the floor until after 10:00 p.m. that night.

The reader is probably wondering why we didn't just call our parents and let them know we were going to be late. Bottom line: we had spent all our money in Huntington Beach, earlier in the day. The trip to "Dago," as we called it, happened after one of us (probably me) said, "You know what would be cool? We should just take-off for San Diego!" Returning home, I think the gas gauge hit the $\frac{1}{4}$ mark somewhere around Temecula, so we probably, very literally, loped into Ontario on fumes.

Getting back to that scene with Bill Short's mom and Duchess. It turned out that she had walked over to the school which was only three or four blocks from their little house on "F" Street. In those days, all three of our young families lived in starter-homes within walking distance of Lincoln Elementary School. Later, the Shorts moved to a nice custom home on the Westside of Ontario, and the Silverthornes moved way up the up the hill, past Upland and into a neighborhood only a block or so off of the peppertree-lined main artery of Ontario and Upland: Euclid Avenue. Euclid, with its park like center-island is, itself, the catalyst for terabytes of my personal memories, but that would be a digression at this point, and—contrary to my normal habit—I'm not going to take that detour right now. This is about the two Bills.

The Silverthornes' moving to Upland in our Sophomore year meant that Bill Silverthorne and I went to rival High Schools. I remember him picking me up in the TD driving over to Chaffey, for a Basketball game between our two schools. I would go to the home-side bleachers and he would go to the visitor-side. After the game was over, regardless of outcome we would silently jump into the MG and go on about our Friday night business—as if nothing had happened.

While Bill Silverthorne and I could often be found hanging around the Auto Auction in L.A., Bill Short and I would hang around the tire shop. Even during high school when Bill had an afternoon job at the shop. ("The shop" was the only name I had ever heard anyone in the Short family call, Leininger and Short) Often, I would follow Bill around as he did his "gopher" and clean up duties after school. Leininger and Short was recapping tires in those days, and the scene included a lot of activity and noise. The machines were like giant round waffle irons. There was a lot of steam-hissing and heat: also, the delicious (to me) smell of the cooking latex as rubber was vulcanized onto old tire-carcasses. Up! would pop a mold-lid and the workers would use some kind of tool to hook the newly-refurbished tire and pull it, still steaming, out of the mold and onto the floor of the shop with a loud bang—an especially loud bang if it was a tire for an 18-wheeler.

Coming out of the mold, tires had lots "flash" around the edge of the tread where excess latex squirted out that needed to be stretched out and hacked off with a sort of pruning knife. Often that was our job. Or Bill's job—I think all I ever did was hang out and get in the way. But, like the Chaffey/Upland basketball games with the other Bill, when this Bill's work was done at the shop, we would proceed on our way—as if nothing had happened.

This brings us to *our* mode of transportation—meaning Bill Short’s mode of transportation—with me riding shotgun. It was a 1930 Model A Town Sedan that Bud and Eileen let him buy for a hundred and twenty-five bucks of his own paper route money, even though he was still too young to drive. It was a very mechanically-sound old Model A. To us, the car was ancient—like riding in a museum piece—being 28 years-old when Bill bought it



That’s only the equivalent of a 1991 vehicle today. But, true, cars had changed a *whole lot* between 1930 and 1957 (think: tailfins and grills like a jet engine intake). So, even though we were far too young to drive it, we managed to coax my bachelor-uncle George to drive us around Sothern Cal many times. Or, maybe we didn’t have to coax too much, since driving the old car was a return to his own teen years in Alabama.

Last time I was in Bill’s bedroom as an adult, he still had a framed black and white I took of Bill, my brother Steve and Uncle George standing in front of the Model A, stopped on a dirt road in the middle of the orange groves of Tustin. I don’t know if any Tustin orange groves, dirt roads or even that old “Model A” still exist in Southern California anymore.

Actually, backing up a little, Bill Silverthorne’s folks gave him a car in junior high as well. For years Silverthorne’s Upland Pharmacy had used a WWII era, Crosley mini wagon for deliveries and somewhere around the time we were in junior high, it went belly-up. Mr. Silverthorne had to switch to the family’s personal cars for delivery until a VW Bug could be procured. As a result of the old Crosley’s demise, Bill enjoyed the experience of taking its tiny 4-cylinder, aluminum-block engine apart and putting it back together, all before we finished our freshman year at Chaffey High. I remember being a bit astounded that he would take on a project like that at our young age; and also, that his parents would let him mess up the garage like that for at least a year.



Even though the three families, Kerrs, Silverthornes and Shorts lived in starter- homes for several years, the Silverthornes were always members of the Red Hill Country Club, even while living across the street from us, in our little East Ontario tract of Henry J. Kaiser pre-fabricated homes on “I” Street and Orchard Lane. In my opinion, Country Club membership was a wise move on big Bill’s part, a customer-relations move, since most of his business

was referred by various medical doctors in the area and, of course, they all belonged to Red Hill. I say, “big Bill”, because it wasn't a Junior-Senior deal with them. Mr. Silverthorne was William Edsel and Billy was William Alec. I used to tease him, calling him William Smart-alec. He would just smirk and agree with me. I think that it fit his self-image at the time. Well, later when I had reached adulthood, I overheard my father telling my brother that I used to be a “smart-alec” when I was a kid as well. So, birds of a feather...

Getting back to our Kaiser Tract, off of East “I” Street, Nelly, our elderly neighbor next-door said, “Those things went up in just a few days,” adding that she had witnessed the whole construction process in 1948. The original purpose for this development was to house imported Pittsburgh-steelworkers for Kaiser’s new mill in Fontana.

But, doubling back to that Country Club membership. Not only was it a great benefit to the pharmacy’s public relations, it was a great benefit to the kids in our blue-collar neighborhood, as Bill’s mom, Vera, could be seen frequently hauling a station wagon full of us up the hill to enjoy the luxurious swimming pool, and the nice snack bar and—when Bill and I were older—a round or two of Golf on Red Hill’s first-class course.

There were also great perks available while hanging out with the Short family, such as, the fact that Grandma Townley, Eileen Short’s mom, owned a beach house at San Juan Capistrano Beach, just North of San Clemente, where Richard Nixon would eventually put his Western White House. It was a stretch, but Bill and I could walk along the beach to the movie theater in San Clemente and did so at least a couple of times—trudging back through the sand in the dark of night.

I honestly can’t tell you how many weekends and even weeks of summer and spring vacations I spent at that beach house, thanks to the generosity of the Short family. Along with those many trips, of course, are entwined threads and threads of memories of boy-hood mischief and adventure at the beach.

My last memory of the beach house is from 1963, the summer before I left Santa Maria to continue college up in San Francisco. I awoke in the middle of the night, went out and sat in the patio, facing the Pacific, and enjoyed the fragrances of the salt air, the kelp, and the creosote in the seawall. My eyes followed the curved, sparkling stream of lights up the coast toward Dana Point and I came to terms with the fact that I might never visit there again.

Nowadays Bill Silverthorne is retired and living in Spokane, Washington. My wife and I have visited Bill and his wife Lorelee in Spokane many times. I’ve been skiing in the winter with him in Washington and Idaho and we have all gone sailing in his 33-foot sailboat in the Puget Sound—as well as powerboating on Lake Coeur d’Alene in a beautiful 1950s Century speed boat he has restored to show-room new condition.

Bill Short took over the tire shop when his dad, Bud, retired, and has become the main distributor for Bridgestone Tires in the Los Angeles Area. He now has five grandsons and a son-in-law to help run things at Leininger and Short. Bill always has a hand in the Chaffey High School. Class of 1961 reunions so I’m always sure to hear from him as each one of those approaches.

So, here we sit, more than a half-century later with all of those mutual threads of memory tying us back to Ontario, California making Ontario loom large in our self-images and our life stories, and—even though we only shared that venue for ten years of our more-than-sixty-year-long friendships—it is toward that direction that the conversation eventually turns, any time we get together.

