

## CHAPTER 13

### THE BEST MISTAKE I EVER MADE

From the front range east, almost far enough to stumble into Kansas, is Arapahoe, Colorado--a great place not to go to but *to be from*. But go to I did in order to accomplish the best mistake I ever made.

It Just So Happened that 1940 was not a good year for musician teachers (band director types) to get jobs anywhere near God's country. But money is where you find it, and having just graduated from the University,<sup>1</sup> I needed money and was finally willing to go wherever it was--even where toilet was at the end of a path, reading light was available only from an endlessly-pump-it-up gas lamp, and hot bath seldom to be found.

As often as possible (maybe once a month) I managed to escape westward in my *new*, four year old, black, 1936 Pontiac (\$125) sedan; beyond Cheyenne Wells, Hugo, Limon, to that place where some of the ground reached for heaven. For a long time while in Eastern Colorado I had the uncomfortable feeling of not knowing where I was. Where west was? I had grown up where west was right there where the mountains were. But in Eastern Colorado the question was, "Where is west when there are no mountains?"

Fact was, it was the weekend in Arapahoe that was bad. During the week, during daylight hours,<sup>2</sup> things were not so bad. I had a good time teaching classes in history and sociology and directing the band--especially the band. I both directed it and played with it. It was fun. And it was a good band. Good enough to win first place in an area band contest. We won primarily because of two talents. First "talent" was one I learned from Herb Walthers, back in high school, the year Englewood tied with the Sterling band for first place in the statewide contest. Walthers at the last minute pulled a smart one. Sterling was a big band (maybe fifty members, one of which was that Charles Milligan) and they played the "Eighteen-twelve Overture," canon banging backstage and all. Walther's knew we could not match that kind of noise, so he cancelled our noisy number and we played a soft, delicate piece which, after Sterling's canon booms, filled the auditorium with real music. I did the same thing. At the last minute, I told the kids to forget the first number. We would play only the soft pretty piece.

That was my ploy, but there was more to it than that. What we played had a beautiful French horn solo in it. And I had a beautiful French horn soloist--who was also a first class French hornist. She did it perfectly, and even before we had finished, I knew we had won.

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<sup>1</sup>Bachelor of Arts Degree in history and music.

<sup>2</sup>The Arapahoe Consolidated High School building did have indoor plumbing, hot water, and electric lights. It also had a spooky wind-howl at night which tended to discourage crapping, showering or reading there after sundown.

She was a beauty,<sup>3</sup> but I was the band director teacher, and a relatively shy fellow to boot. There was never any hanky-panky (was the old word for it) between us. Indeed, for a long time she was not interested enough in the new band director to know his name. She thought it was Trimble or Trimbling.

We kept our distance--except almost not quite one time. The school was giving a dance. I, as a teacher, was one of the chaperons. It Just So Happened that at one point in the evening I deserted the dance floor and went across the hall to a quiet room for a little escape. It was a room with a mirror on one wall. Standing in front of that mirror was that French horn player preening a bit. I said, "Vanity, vanity, thy name is woman." And I didn't say it just to quote Shakespeare. I said it flirting. She looked at me and just for a moment flirted back.<sup>4</sup> Then she went on her way walking with that certain wiggle. And that was it, all of it, right through to the end of the school year and my escaping *from* as fast as that Pontiac would go.

Back in Denver I enrolled in Iliff School of Theology and took a summer job selling mens shirts at The May Company. One day I looked across the floor and there she was. She and a friend (actually the sister of her boyfriend), standing there looking back at me. Of course, I went across to say "Hi, how come you're here?" She had come to Denver to go to school--Parks Business School.<sup>5</sup> She must have given me a telephone number because sometime later I called to ask her to have dinner with me some evening. It was arranged. I don't remember a thing about it. All I remember is that after we had done whatever it was we were doing, I took her to her place of residence. She went up a couple of steps toward the front door, turned, looked at me, bent down--and kissed me. My world exploded.

Who could forget? You  
came like happy song on a  
day that reached for spring.

The best damned mistake I ever made was going just short of the Kansas line.

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<sup>3</sup>She was Opal LaVerne Mitchell, born February 11, 1924, near Canton, Oklahoma.

<sup>4</sup>She now insists that she just smiled back.

<sup>5</sup>Opal LaVerne Mitchell was 17 years old as she stood there across the room looking at me.