

## A MAN AND HIS WHEELS

In the second chapter of my "Love of Aviation" series, I wrote of having gone from our home in Glendale to the 1936 National Air Races in wide open fields where LAX now stands, and to model airplane contests without mentioning how I got to any of them. The answer was always the same. My three-years-older brother, Baxter Keyt Wolf, drove me in his car.

Baxter and cars first came together in 1931 in the quiet town of Hermosa Beach, California. This Wolf family of six was living in a rented, wood-frame house on a sandy hill facing away from the beach at the north end of town. This was our fourth house in four years in Hermosa. Uncle Tom, Mother's younger brother, who visited us frequently from his home in Los Angeles, used to tease Dad saying, "It must be cheaper to move than to pay rent." Dad didn't laugh.

Dad started out as a carpenter and later became a commercial artist taking work wherever he could find it. For several months he had a good-paying art job in nearby Manhattan Beach. At other times he had art work in Los Angeles, but too often he had no work at all.

Mother made room in our home for a 15-year-old girl from Los Angeles to room and board with us for a year to provide a small but steady income. Our sister Carol Ann was born in this house on September 7, 1932.

During that one good period of employment, Dad bought a used 1926 Studebaker Big-Six Touring Car, a large car with open sides and a black fabric top. It was so tall that you first had to take a large step up onto a running board, open a door, and then step up again to get in. From his high perch, Dad loved to grasp that big wooden steering wheel and look down on other cars.

In the spring of 1931, Dad built and opened a small waffle shop on a sandy lot a few doors south of the main intersection in town, one long block from the ocean. "Walter Wolf's Wonder Waffles" proclaimed the big round metal sign he had made to resemble a waffle. As tasty as the waffles were, he had to expand the menu. Mother loved to cook and was soon preparing a modest range of other dishes at home, about two miles from Dad's shop. How to get that food there?

No problem. Baxter, who was already much taller than Dad, instantly became the wheels of the business. That he had no driver's license was a moot point. Things were much simpler in the early 1930's. Licenses were issued by local authorities and the minimum age was only fourteen! On his 14<sup>th</sup> birthday, November 28, 1931, Baxter went to the City Hall to get his license. Eddie Messenger, the Chief of Police, told Baxter there was no need for a driving test. "I've seen you driving past here many times."

In the fall of 1932, we moved again, to a very tall wood-frame house on Hermosa Avenue, just three blocks from Dad's waffle shop.

In those days, cars needed lots of attention to keep them running. Dad had neither the skills nor the time for car work. If the engine wouldn't start, Baxter would insert a big crank at the front end of the engine, and give it a mighty twist. The engine would gasp and hopefully start. One time when it wouldn't start, Baxter asked a slightly older friend, Fred Hansen, who had a car of his own, to help out. I wasn't quite 12 years old, but I was eager to help. Fred wondered if the spark plugs were getting sparks from the magneto. Using one of Dad's long carpenter's screw-drivers, my task was to hold the end of one high-voltage wire a short distance from the tip of its spark plug. Baxter was to give the crank a might twist and Fred was to watch for the spark. There were two problems with

this plan. The handle on Dad's screw-driver wasn't insulated and I was leaning on the fender of the car. When the magneto fired, the shock knocked me backwards half-way across the garage. Baxter picked me up and dusted me off, but only after he and Fred could stop laughing!

Business at Dad's waffle shop was profitable in the summer but dropped sharply in the fall, not close to supporting his family which now numbered seven. A year and a half of that cycle was enough for him. In November of 1933, Dad abandoned the shop and we moved to Glendale, California, for a fresh start.

Our new home was a rented, single-story, wood-frame house, a block from the north end of the business section of Glendale. Dad's car got us that far, but no further. It sat idle in the garage for many months and was finally donated to a charity. This location was close to the Pacific Electric Railway, whose famous Big Red Cars could take Dad into downtown Los Angeles when there was work for him. Baxter and my twin sister and I walked one and one-half miles each way to school. Brother Bob's Elementary school was only a few blocks from home.

Once, when there was no local work for him, Dad went to Denver, Colorado, to live with his older sister, Helen Ernst, and her family, and to seek work. Both Mother and Dad were raised in Denver, met and were married there. Baxter was born there in 1917. Dad's return trip to Denver in 1931 was not productive. He found no significant work and sent very little money to Mother. Somehow, she managed to feed her hungry brood.

Mother's widowed mother, whom we called "Mima," a name Uncle Tom had given her when he was very young, lived modestly in a small apartment in downtown Glendale. At the opposite end of the economic scale was her cousin "Otie," who lived near Cincinnati, Ohio. Otie had married into the Proctor family, of Proctor and Gamble fame.

Otie's oldest daughter, Margaret Rogan, like many other wealthy people living in the east, spent her winters in Pasadena, California. She visited our home in Glendale, recognized our great needs and created what today might be called "Save The Wolf's."

This angel, whom we called Cousin Margaret, started buying a good-sized, two-story stucco home for us on Idlewood Road in northwest Glendale. The financial details were entrusted to Uncle Tom, who had much more business experience than either Dad or Mother. Dad had returned home from Denver, only to go back there again a few months later when his off-and-on art work in Los Angeles stopped again.

Now back to the story of Baxter and his wheels. Re-enter Baxter's friend, Fred Hansen, from Hermosa Beach, who was now living in Glendale. Fred had a very tired, 1926 Chevrolet sedan that Baxter could buy for twenty dollars, to be paid later. After much work by both of them, this car ran, but not very well.

Baxter's main interest in high school was in art. He had developed great talent in ceramics and in unique, poster-like paintings. When he graduated from Hoover High in 1935, he was awarded a scholarship to prestigious Choinard Art Institute in Los Angeles. With Dad back in Denver, Baxter passed up that scholarship and hitch-hiked back and forth to a job at a truck service station about ten miles from home to bring in some money for the family.

Along with many other families in Glendale, we were eligible to receive fresh vegetables grown in Federally-sponsored WPA gardens, not far from our home. These vegetables were available to us in exchange for a few hours of work each week in those gardens. Dad was in Denver, so in addition to whatever else Baxter was doing, he stepped in and worked off Dad's share of that labor.

**Enter another angel from Ohio. On one of Cousin Margaret's visits, she brought along a friend whose name escapes me now. She recognized Baxter's great efforts, saw his very tired 1926 Chevrolet, and bought a shiny, used, 1932 Chevrolet Sedan for him. This is the car in which Baxter drove younger brother Bob and me to our unpaid jobs as ushers in the grandstands at the 1936 National Air Races in the wide-open fields where LAX is today. This car met its demise in a non-injury accident a half block from our home.**

**Baxter's next car was a large, used 1929 Cadillac sedan. He had this car when he started dating his future wife, Ruth Elizabeth Adams, who lived on the next street east of ours. This is the car that Baxter drove brother Bob and me to a model airplane contest near where the Cargo Terminals of LAX now stand.**

**I was fortunate enough to win First-Place in a rubber-band-powered-model event. The prize was a Baby Cyclone, a small gasoline engine for larger model airplanes. I was ecstatic!**

**Somehow, the finances of that house purchase got tangled with another and we lost that house. Cousin Margaret came to the rescue and we moved about a mile further west in Glendale to a large, single-story stucco house on Ruberta Ave.**

**Dad was home again, doing art work, a few weeks at a time in Los Angeles. He bought a used, 1923 Studebaker Victoria Coupe, an ungainly tall, two-door car with varnished wood spoke wheels, an almost-impossible-to-shift-transmission, and brakes on only the rear wheels. This is the car in which I learned to drive. Dad was hardly a patient teacher, and I was a terribly nervous student, but we both survived the experience.**

**In January 1938, my twin sister and I graduated from Hoover High School. She went on to Glendale Junior College. I started work at the Baby Cyclone Factory at Grand Central Air Terminal. Brother Bob was a light-weight, signal-calling fullback on Hoover's varsity football team. How Dad loved football! The whole family, plus girl friends and boy friends went to every game, made more noise in the grandstands than any other group, and win or lose, rain or shine, always stayed to the end.**

**Now back to Baxter's Cadillac. It met its demise on the way home from an overnight trip to a model airplane contest on a large mesa north of San Diego. We were in wide open country a few miles south of Laguna Beach when the oil pressure dropped to zero, the engine screamed like a banshee and then self-destructed. I hitch-hiked to a telephone and called home. Dad hadn't always been around for his family, but he really came through for us that day! He got in his big, tall, Studebaker, found us, and carefully towed us home. This was years before the advent of freeways. We got home around midnight. Many, many thanks, Dad, you were great. Good bye, Baxter's Cadillac.**

**Baxter's next car was a small, used, 1934 Plymouth Roadster. He had a back-breaking, midnight-to-dawn job at the Gladding-McBean Pottery Factory at the south edge of Glendale. He dated Ruthie by day. They married on April 18, 1941. Dad may have been there, but he wasn't in sight.**

**My twin sister, Clara Louise, had taken Mother's name, Helen, and was dating C. O. "Bob" Shanteau, whom she had met at Glendale Junior College. Bob was almost seven years older than Helen, but even worse in Dad's eyes, he owned a car! Bob Shanteau was disarmingly out-spoken and frequently at odds with Dad. So much so, that when Helen and Bob were married on July 11, 1941, it was me, her twin brother, who escorted her down the aisle. As with Baxter's and Ruth's wedding, Dad may have been there, but he was not in sight.**

**Our younger brother, Bob, was still playing football at Hoover High. Our sister, Carol Ann, was attending nearby Theodore Roosevelt Elementary School.**

In June, 1940, I graduated from Curtiss-Wright Technical Institute's Aeronautical Engineering Division, took a job teaching job in their Aviation Manufacturing Division at \$100 per month, and bought my first car, a used, 1934 Dodge sedan. It cost \$169.

Dad had enjoyed a few months of art work in nearby Van Nuys and bought a large, used, 1931 Cadillac Sedan. Both of these cars needed engine work. Baxter helped me repair mine. I helped him repair Dad's.

My future wife, Betty Parsons, lived in nearby Burbank, but we met at a model airplane contest in Bakersfield, California, in May, 1941. It was almost love at first sight for both of us. We were married in Glendale on April 24, 1942.

Betty's and my sub-plot also involves cars. I was driving my 1934 Dodge sedan. She was driving an elegant, black, 1935 Packard Club Coupe. She has steadfastly maintained that I married her to get her car.

In 1939, after another lean period of work for Dad, and some further complications of house finances, the Wolf family moved again. This time it was to a brand-new, single-story, stucco, tract home on Newby Street in Glendale, close to Grand Central Air Terminal. Cousin Margaret was doing her magic again. What an angel!

As we three older children were maturing, asserting ourselves, becoming independent and then getting married, there were ever-increasing pressures and tensions at home, generally in the area of money. Were we each doing our share? From today's distant perspective, given the difficult circumstances of the 1930's, his off-and-on work, and his evolving family, we can see that try as he might, Dad simply couldn't cope with it all.

Mother was all too often caught in the middle of those tense and noisy confrontations. Nothing was more important to her than her family, but she was being torn apart. As difficult as it was for her to face the reality of the total situation, she finally filed for a divorce in the summer of 1942. Our next door neighbor, an attorney, handled it quietly. There was no contest and no cheers. Mother got the house and the joy of being close to all of their 18 grandchildren. Dad got his car. Dad maintained contact with brother Bob's family for several years. I seldom saw Dad again.

With the chronological nature of this narrative, there was no place to insert the two annual events that consistently brought great joy to all of us, Christmas and the Fourth of July. Christmas started weeks ahead of time as we all pitched in to help Mother bake enormous quantities of German Christmas cookies, and ended with an exciting gift exchange Christmas morning. Fourth of July was noisy by day and brilliantly colorful by night. Whether or not Dad was working at the time, he somehow always found a way to have fireworks. I can still hear them, see them, and smell that wonderful smoke. Dad was in his glory. It's a great way to remember him.

This story about a man and his wheels has grown to become one about a man and his wheels and his family. From his first ride in that Big-Six Studebaker Touring Car in 1931 to his last ride in his shiny black Ford Station Wagon just hours before his untimely passing away in 1973, Baxter had proven, over and over, with or without wheels, and with or without thanks, to be the real hero of the original Wolf family. What a legacy! Drive on, Baxter.