

Chapter Three: Noel and Evangeline's Trail

One man returns, again; An author connects

742 St. Anthony, West Peoria, IL, Summer 1994

“Hello this is Ed. Well Evangeline how are ya’ and what’s the news from Long Beach?”

“Edward I have something that I want to tell you and something important that I want to ask you.”

“Okay Mom I’m listening. Are you ok? What’s up?”

“Oh yes I’m fine but—well—I got a phone call the other night from an old friend from North Dakota. His name is Noel Ravneberg and he’s a man that I knew when I was growing up in North Dakota. We dated a couple times long before I knew your father. He tells me that three years ago his wife died and he wants to come visit me.”

“Gee Mom that sounds swell. Why are you calling me?”

“I don’t really know if I should let him visit. A friend of mine is getting married and there is going to be a reception and I don’t have an escort so I thought maybe I’d ask Noel to come along as my companion at the party. He knows some of the people that will be there because one of the families is from North Dakota. But I just don’t know if it’s the right thing to do.”

“Gosh Mom it seems like you should be able to ask anybody to escort you to a party that you want.”

“Yes I can but I’m not sure that I should. He lives in Williamsburg, Virginia. That’s a long trip for somebody to make. Maybe he won’t be happy that he went to all the trouble once he gets here.”

“I don’t know Vange. If he went to all the trouble to find you and call you and ask if he can come visit it sounds as though he’s eager enough that there isn’t much you can do to disappoint him. And so what if you do? He certainly wouldn’t have any expectations that you’d just throw yourself at him after—how long has it been since you’ve seen him?

“Oh goodness after the War but before I met your Dad. Must be almost 50 years ago. You know—he’s not staying at the house—he’s going to get a hotel room.”

“For gosh sake Evangeline what difference does that make? You have a big house. If you don’t trust the guy enough to be alone with him you probably shouldn’t even encourage him to come to town.”

“Well that’s just not done you know it wouldn’t be right. He’ll be fine in a hotel. He has lots of money and can afford it and I’ll feel better in my own place with just me. I’ve gotten used to that this past nine years. Anyway I just wanted you to know so you wouldn’t be upset.”

“Evangeline I think it sounds wonderful that you can see an old friend that you knew in your younger days. It’s nice that you called me but it’s totally unnecessary. You’re a big girl and can do whatever you’d like. I trust your judgment on this one.”

“Ok thanks honey. You give Cheryl and the kids a big kiss and hug for me please and I’ll let you know how this goes.”

“Alright Mom. You have fun and tell us all about it whenever you want. Don’t forget how much we love you.”

“Oh I love you too sweetheart. I’ll call soon. Thanks a lot. Bye now.”

“Was that your mother Edward? What did she want?”

“Oh my gawd Cheryl. She sounded like a high school girl checking in with her father. For gawd’s sake she’s seventy-six years old.”

“What are you talking about? What did she want?”

“Some old boyfriend who lives in Virginia called her and wants to visit in Long Beach. She called to tell me about it to make sure that it’s ok with me.”

“What did you tell her?”

“What do you think I told her? I told her that she’s a little old to be checking such stuff with her son. Ah well. She’s been alone a long time now. Tough to think that she’d ever take up with another man. But it won’t hurt her to have a little fun. I know that she’s pretty lonesome out there most of the time. She said that the guy has some money—maybe he’ll take her on a cruise or something.”



*November 1994. Long Beach California.
Mr. and Mrs. Noel Ravneberg*

After Roger's passing, Evangeline stayed in their home at 6530 Driscoll in Long Beach. Early in their marriage, Evangeline and Noel owned two homes, the width of the country apart. Noel and his first wife, Dorothy, retired from their professional careers in New York, purchased property in the gated *Ford's Colony* in Williamsburg Virginia, and built a new home. Sadly, Dorothy was struck with cancer and passed away before they were able to enjoy the home. Noel set up her home-hospital bed in the front living area of the home so that she could watch the workmen complete the property just prior to her passing. Noel lived a widower in the home for three years before calling Evangeline.

Noel and Evangeline talked about keeping both properties. Money was not an issue for Noel: From 1954 until 1981, Noel worked as a hydraulic engineering geologist, first for the State of New York, then later through a long career in private industry. Noel's work took him around the world working construction projects including roads, bridges, buildings, and dams.

After leaving post-war North Dakota, Noel did not first set-out to be an engineer. He left North Dakota headed for the Bulova Watch School in New York; his older brother, Lloyd was in the jewelry business after spending time at the Bradley University School of Horology in Peoria Illinois. True fact: Noel's older brother, Lloyd, attended the school I where I spent thirty-seven years on the faculty!

Not long after arriving in New York, Noel met the Bulova School's librarian, Dorothy Nistle Orde. Dorothy Nistle had divorced Mr. Orde but kept his name. Hailing from Michigan, where her father worked as a patent-holding engineer, Dorothy probably influenced Noel to enter Columbia's engineering program. Noel and "Doro" married and Noel attended Columbia for both the B.S. and an M.S. Meanwhile, Dorothy moved from libraries to commercial research,

serving as a research specialist in New York City-based advertising companies. Dorothy was also a top-notch amateur artistic photographer. Together they made lucrative salaries and so, without any children to raise, they amassed significant financial security for their retirements.

That Noel and Evangeline would keep and split time between the two homes was not a far-fetched idea, at least financially speaking. There was, however, one catch. Noel's time as a hydraulic engineer caused him to be exceedingly skittish in Southern California's earthquake zones. Initially, he assumed and said that the quakes would not bother him. But in the end, the planned "spring and fall in Virginia and summer and winter in Long Beach" schedule turned into "we just don't think that we want to try to keep up a house in Long Beach given that we won't ever live in it again." After one short stay in the Long Beach house during their first year of marriage, a one jarring earthquake encouraged Noel to convince Evangeline to put the house up for sale and move to Williamsburg, full-time.

As with all marriages, and I suspect especially with second marriages involving senior citizens marrying people they'd known earlier in their lives, the circumstances of their unions presented numerous pluses and minuses. Noel and Evangeline's marriage featured a large number of conflicting outcomes.

Roger and Evangeline lived a frugal, middle-class life, especially once they decided to keep me within the Catholic education system in both Iowa and California. Roger's Navy, then post office, salaries supported them amply but not extravagantly.

Only automobiles and homes were financed; credit cards were used to purchase gasoline when on trips—otherwise they did not use credit cards or buy material objects on credit. They saved regularly, paid private school tuition, and made weekly contributions to the Catholic

Church that met or exceeded a 10% tithe. They took very few vacations and purchased almost no extravagant items.

Roger was not interested in travel. He was willing to go to the Midwest to visit family over summer vacations every couple years, but he would not visit more exotic locations. Evangeline blamed the Angels baseball team. While he always took his vacation over the summer so that I'd be out of school and able to travel, Roger was very uncomfortable when he was out of radio range for Angel broadcasts during the baseball season. His unwillingness actually ran deeper than that: Roger loved his home and really enjoyed being there. He was a simple man who had already seen a lot of the world; he didn't need or want further international travel. Evangeline, on the other hand, had only been outside the United States during her infancy in Canada and later family visits there as well as the short time in Hawaii before it was a state; Mom longed for international travel experiences.

After Roger died, Evangeline took a couple of boat cruises to Alaska; once with her brother Dick and sister Veronica and another time with neighbors, Bill and Marge Hoppe and other Long Beach friends. Marrying Noel offered the opportunity for real travel because he was a practiced-and-ready gad-about. He took her on cruises to Southeast Asia, the Mediterranean, and the UK. At last she was able to "see the world."

The gated community in Williamsburg was top-notch. The home was beautiful and the setting was wooded and idyllic. *Ford's Colony* features a top-ranked golf course as well as a community center with resort-level restaurants and bar. Noel and Evangeline took full advantage of the niceties of a big home in a fancy neighborhood.

However, there was a significant drawback in the housing situation that became more apparent as the years went by and the couple aged. Noel suffered from macular degeneration and was legally blind. Toward the end of their time together, he was unable to drive. Evangeline suffered numerous eye surgeries for cataracts and cornea trouble, was unfamiliar with the Williamsburg terrain and simply chose to not get behind the wheel once they moved to Virginia.

As Noel's condition worsened and he stopped driving they faced a transportation problem: Even though they both qualified for disability services, their home was four blocks too deep inside *Ford's Colony* for the public door-to-door bus service. One would think that with a lot of money they would just call a taxi; and when Noel wanted to go somewhere that's exactly what he did. However, Evangeline's life history kicked in and she found herself unable to make the call. Growing up in the Depression (as had Noel) and living a lifetime as a decidedly middle-class Navy life and wife of a post office worker (very much unlike Noel's life of relative luxury and extensive travel), my Mother was simply unable to act like a rich lady. And so, she became more and more isolated in their home. She complained about not being able to escape but was unwilling to pick up the phone and hire a conveyance.

In a similar vein, Noel's profile featured a number of aspects that served him enormously well through the *Bataan Death March* and three and one-half years in Japanese prison camps. He was self-sufficient, organized, technically proficient, handy, and logical: Noel Ravneberg just made things work. But as his eyesight deteriorated and his health weakened, he was unwilling to give up the home he had mastered. Noel knew where everything was in the home he ordered built in *Ford's Colony*; he had memorized the numbers of steps between rooms and knew exactly where he put things. Familiarity enabled him to survive in his surroundings and survival in his

surroundings was an essential part of his DNA. However, these very strengths worked against him once his disabilities reached a point when he needed help. The couple was unwilling to shop for more appropriate and more functional surroundings because Noel didn't want to move. Further, almost eighty-year-old Evangeline, she with bad eyesight and cancer, noted that "we don't want to move to *those places*; there are *old people* living there." This too contributed to Evangeline's feelings of (and actual) isolation. On the whole I think that one can say that they were happy together in their plus/minus calculus.

One of the highlights of their time together involved reversing the U.S. government's lack of full recognition of Noel's military service. Noel received a large number of medals and commendations for his service, including the *Bronze Star*, *Presidential Unit* emblem (3), *P.O.W.* medal, *Philippine Defense* ribbon, *Good Conduct* medal (2), *World War II Victory* medal, *Army of Occupation* medal (Japan), *American Campaign* medal; *American Defense Service* medal, and *Asiatic-Pacific Campaign* medal. However, military protocol required that in order to earn the *Purple Heart*, one had to be wounded in battle. As was the case with many survivors of *The Trek* and the prison camps, although he was mistreated, suffered from many diseases, and broke many bones, Noel had suffered neither shooting nor stab wounds. Few survivors of *The Trek* and the World War II Japanese prison camps received the *Purple Heart*. After U.S. forces surrendered and the Philippines fell, not many men wounded by bullets or bayonets made it out alive while many survivors had neither been shot nor wounded with sharp weapons.

Over the decades, veterans' organizations advocated that the government change the rules and recognize the service and suffering of these worthy soldiers and prisoners of war. Especially as the cohort aged and many of them died, political pressure was applied to force the government

to change its position and award the medals to these deserving veterans. The 1996 National Defense Authorization Act was passed and enabled WWII veterans who were injured as POWs to receive the *Purple Heart*. However, in July 1973 a disastrous fire occurred at the veterans' records center in St. Louis wiping out nearly 80% of the Army's records; those records were required to verify worthy candidates. Applications could be made, replacing the records with other materials, but the entire process was beyond frustratingly slow. The veterans' group that Noel belonged to in Williamsburg included a number of *Purple Heart* recipients who had worked hard to gain that honor for him. Unfortunately, they made little progress.

After meeting Noel and talking with him a number of times I learned enough about the situation to reach the conclusion that I should help. Noel did not tell stories about his captivity easily or in-depth. However, he shared enough with me to make it clear that the honor would make a positive difference to him. I contacted staff in the office of my local Congressional representative, Ray LaHood, and asked for their help. The head of Ray's office in Peoria, Sheri Lemaster, was particularly helpful and before long we were notified that Noel would receive the *Purple Heart*.

Evangeline accompanied him to the ceremony and both were beyond thrilled and proud. The veterans' groups in Williamsburg assumed that their hard work had finally paid off; they were not



Evangeline Bechtel Lamoureux Ravneberg and Noel as Noel receives the Purple Heart. May 7, 2002, Fort Monroe, Virginia

aware that additional efforts were made by a strategic alliance with one of the most powerful members of the U.S. House of Representatives. Tragically, within three weeks his health took a drastic turn for the worse.

Earlier, as his health worsened, Noel had put his estate in order. He took care of legal documents and made plans for end-of-life decisions. He also sold the tools that he had used throughout his life as well as other objects in the home. In spring 2002, Noel was hospitalized and word came to Peoria that he wasn't going to return to Evangeline and home; I jumped on a flight to Williamsburg. Once there I joined my uncle Dick Bechtel who had spent many months taking care of the couple by splitting time between Williamsburg and his home in California; he made the trip a number of times during the last year of Noel's illness and life. Dick later served as the executor of their estate once Evangeline passed. Uncle Dick was there to meet me at the airport when I arrived.

The Sunday before Noel died we received a call from a man who wanted to purchase the last piece of heavy equipment from Noel's tools and equipment. Noel spent a lot of time working with wood and he had yet to sell his large table lathe. The man gave us his name and we told him that we would call the front gate with his name so they would let him pass and we would meet him in the driveway when he arrived. Fifteen or so minutes later Dick and I were in the driveway helping the man load the lathe into his truck. After we got the piece loaded the man stopped and asked about the owner of the lathe: "What can you tell me about the man who is selling this lathe? Not everyone owns a wonderful piece of equipment such as this. He must have been a special guy."

Dick and I regaled the man with a long story about Noel and his status as a war hero. We reported that a few weeks earlier Noel had received the *Purple Heart* and of course that he had been on the *Bataan Death March* and spent years in the Japanese prison camps. The man looked surprised and asked “did you say that he was on the *Bataan Death March*?” After we assured him of that fact he said “my father-in-law, Hampton Sides, recently published a *New York Times* best-selling book about the Bataan Death March, titled *Ghost Soldiers*.” Coincidentally, I had very recently finished reading that very book. Before Noel passed away he had a copy of *Ghost Soldiers*, signed by the author, at his bedside. Noel Marvin Ravneberg died in Williamsburg VA, May, 18, 2002.

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