

**HEART  
TO  
COACH**



**ROBERT MARK IHRIG**



# Dedication

With gratitude, I dedicate this book about Robert Carl Ihrig to the five small Nebraska schools where he taught and coached. Those years were the happiest and most productive of his short life. He always remembered the sense of accomplishment he received from teaching students and the joy that brightened his life while coaching.

In writing his story, I spent ten years interviewing over one hundred and fifty former students and athletes taught and coached by my father. They deserve most of the credit for this book since it came from their memories.

Everyone, except one, vividly remembered Mr. Bob Ihrig. All of them, except for one, had nothing but praise and appreciation for the year or two they had the opportunity to learn from him. His influence on their lives lasted a lifetime. It's genuinely an honorable legacy for any teacher or coach to be remembered, and Coach Ihrig was remembered.

He was not always conventional, but he was consistently passionate. He appreciated every boy and girl he taught and coached.

**1952 – 1953 – Venango Panthers**

**1953 – 1954 – Alvo Orioles**

**1954 – 1955 – Yutan Chieftains**

**1955 – 1957 – Otoe Wildcats**

**1957 – 1958 – Clatonia Cardinals**

The only school that has remained in operation is Yutan. The other schools were closed due to financial strains. They had to consolidate, and sadly, when a local high school closes, much of the town dies with the school. Children are the life blood of any community. Coach Ihrig realized their importance for the present and for the future.

## Acknowledgements

Nobody writes a book in isolation. Many along the way helped me, not only former students and players, but others who loved and were part of Robert Carl Ihrig's life.

In 1957, a former elementary classmate of Pammy Sue Ihrig was a boy by the name of Gene Steinmeyer. Young Gene followed the Clatonia Cardinals faithfully during that particular season of 1957-'58. He had a close connection to the team. His favorite uncle, whom his parents named him for, was Coach Gene Else, the former superintendent and coach at Clatonia, Nebraska.

Coach Gene Else taught his nephew Gene how to play the game of basketball. But it was Coach Bob Ihrig who taught young Gene how to win.

Gene Steinmeyer went on to become a successful women's basketball coach. He returned to Wilbur, Nebraska, where he coached the 1982-'83 Wilbur/Clatonia Girls Basketball Team to a perfect season and a State Championship. Like so many small schools, Clatonia could not survive independently but lasted longer than most. Clatonia and Wilbur consolidated in 1970.

After Gene retired from teaching and coaching, he wrote a book titled, *27 – Two Tales of Perfection*, published in 2013. The book re-captured the Clatonia Cardinals historic season of 1957-'58 coached by Bob Ihrig, and the sensational year the 1982-'83 Wilbur/Clatonia Girls' basketball team enjoyed under Coach Gene Steinmeyer.

Gene organized a reunion in Clatonia of players from both squads. Pamela Sue (Ihrig) Winn, Robert Mark Ihrig, and Kim Louise (Ihrig) Vokal, were invited. My siblings and I signed copies of Gene's book in honor of our father. At this reunion, we met our father's players, and it prompted the long journey of the book – *Heart to Coach*. Thanks, Gene, you inspired us. The whole story of our father's extra-ordinary life can now be shared.

I am thankful to Robert Carl Ihrig's first-born daughter, my older sister, Pamela Sue (Ihrig) Winn, who was fondly called Pammy Sue throughout this book. Out of all his children, Pamela is the one who was lucky enough to inherit our father's outgoing personality and vivacious charm.

Pam helped reconstruct our childhood and all the moves from one town to the next. She also preserved our family photographs. Pammy Sue was right next to her father for the first fourteen years of her life, following his dreams and enjoying the roller coaster ride he took us on.

Robert Carl Ihrig's younger sister, June LaVaughn (Ihrig) (Warner) Parker, freely gave of her time to re-live their childhood. June idolized her older brother and saw the greatness he possessed. Witnessing her brother's struggles with heart disease and revealing the hurt of being abandoned by their father, it was not easy telling about their past, but she did so graciously.

Maisy's youngest brother, James Verlyn Chitwood, only knew his older sister as Dora Mae. He helped fill in the gaps about their childhood and the colorful history of the Chitwood's and Willey's. He said many times, "Dora Mae did the work of two men on our farm."

I am grateful to the local chapter of the Willmar Jaycees. This organization gave our father a new lease on life. They accepted him, helped him grow, and encouraged him to enjoy his last remaining years. The Jaycees recognized Bob Ihrig as a winner.

I recognize the Veterans Administration. The Army should have never allowed my father to enlist, but they did. The Veterans Administration stood by his side for the rest of his life. They also supported my mother for the remainder of her life. They helped Pammy Sue and Bobby Mark financially while they attended college.

Today, a World War II bronze flag holder sits next to our father's tombstone. Every Memorial Day, the V.A. continues to honor him by placing an American Flag in that holder.

Lastly, I acknowledge the assistance of my fantastic wife, Susan Jean Butherus Ihrig. She edited every chapter and, in many cases, re-wrote the words, making them better than I could have ever done. I'll forever be indebted to her for helping make this book about my father a reality.

## **Preface**

Bob Ihrig had a personality that caused everyone to like him. In fact there were very few people he didn't like. Bob was one of the most intelligent people that I have ever known. He could read a book and tell you in detail what was in it. That was what made him a very good coach. Bob left High School his senior year to join the Army. However he did complete his G.E.D. If he would have graduated with his class, he no doubt would have been Valedictorian. He was ambitious and energetic. Again that is what made him a very good coach. If I remember, when his team won the State Basketball Championship, his team was the only undefeated basketball team in the state. He was also one of a few coaches to win 100 games in his first five years of coaching. If health would have allowed it, he would have been a star athlete. Later in years, when he started selling insurance, he was one of the top salesman many times. If his health would have held up, he would have probably been in management. I don't know how many people knew it, but he was a good piano player, too.

It was a pleasure to know Bob Ihrig. I remember him as a person to make things happen.

Bud Warner

Oren Miller is writing a second preface.

Oren Miller

# Introduction

My Dad had a bad heart from birth, but he had a heart to coach.

This is the story of a coach at heart.

It is written from our own personal family history and the accounts told to me from his players and students.

This is the story of my father – a successful coach with a life cut short from heart disease.

I'm telling his story from a disadvantage point – I was only a witness to his life for less than a decade and a half. I've studied my father's coaching notebooks, yearbooks, newspaper articles, his important documents, and photographs. After interviewing remaining family members and friends, and those he coached and taught, we have pieced together this account, with the garnishment of imagination based on my memory of the father I've missed every day since his early passing.

You are invited to enter the world of Robert Carl Ihrig, and be entertained therein.

Robert Mark Ihrig

February, 2024

## Old Settlers Picnic

### *Indianola, Nebraska - August 1948*



*Bob Ihrig and his 1946 Crosley*

A newly acquired 1946 Crosley Crosmobile, Bob's first car, sat idling at the curb while two of his buddies admired the undersized vehicle and ran their hands covetously over the rounded fenders.

The boys were heading to the Old Settlers Picnic in Indianola. From McCook, it was just eleven miles east on the main highway – 6 & 34. By the time Bob navigated the sharp curve in the road at the Red Willow country school, the boys knew they were halfway to their destination.

The Old Settlers celebration was always on the second Thursday of August. There was always a morning parade. There was always a community potluck picnic in the park at noon. There was always a full line-up of afternoon activities in the stifling heat: baseball, horseshoes, and checkers in the shade for the old-timers. There was always a street dance in the evening with music from a favorite local band.

And, there were always lots of girls.

In the forties, Indianola was a town of around eight hundred, stationed in the southwestern county of Red Willow, which had been named after the dogwood willows growing along the creek banks. The willow branches and stems were stained deep red and used by the Sioux and Pawnee in basket-making long before the early settlers arrived.

To the townspeople, farm folk, and visitors, the celebration held top billing. They donned their Sunday clothes, but Bob exposed a fashion sense rarely seen in this locale with his spiffy linen pants and fancy two-toned Italian leather shoes.

Just because he dressed with a flare didn't mean Bob was uppity; on the contrary, he smiled at everyone – the crotchety old farmers, their hard-working wives, the town's young children, and especially the girls.

The McCook boys lost at a watermelon eating contest, though the contestants competed on a platform stage, where they surveyed the admiring audience watching below.

Bob noticed a girl staring at him from a few yards away. Her black wavy hair contrasted the white summer dress she wore, and her red lipstick accentuated the tan skin on her arms and legs.

As evening settled in, some men roped off Main Street. The gritty gravelly road became the dance floor. Thousands of tiny twinkly Christmas bulbs illuminated the two-block downtown.

Stagemeyer's Orchestra, from nearby Holbrook, assembled in the back of a large hay wagon. Promptly at nine, the music began.

The sweltering hot air hampered many of the settlers, but within another half hour, immobility gave way to rhythm, and the crowd filled the street.

In the middle of the second hour, the older folks left for home, leaving the young people alone with the band.

Stagemeyer's played all the popular songs plus well-known oldies: Benny Goodman's "Let's Dance," Nat King Cole Trio's "I Love You for Sentimental Reasons," Dinah Shore's "Blues in the Night," the Andrews Sisters' "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B," and "When You Wish Upon a Star."

Under the canopy of stars and lights, the dancers swung freely to the jitterbug, the dive, foxtrot, and lindy hop.

The girl in white and Bob had been catching glimpses and stealing glances at each other for hours.

At midnight, as the band leader announced the last song, the girl in white winked at Bob and he strolled over to ask her for the dance. While the opening notes of Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade" played, the two made their introductions: "Dora Mae Chitwood meet Robert Carl Ihrig."

## **The Temple & Fox** *McCook, Nebraska – Summer 1948*

Robert Carl Ihrig, the budding workaholic, mounted up as many hours as he could muster at the Temple Opera House and Fox Theater before his first semester at McCook Junior College.

Bob worked days, evenings, and weekends flipping from one place to the other. Payroll came from a company out of Denver, which owned the Temple and the Fox. The two businesses were less than a block apart on Norris Avenue in downtown McCook, and were only four blocks from Bob's home on West Third.

Mr. Ray Search had managed both places for years and had hired Bob when he was in 8th grade. Through high school, he worked his way up to doorman.

After a brief and embarrassing stint in the United States Army, Bob returned home to McCook and was rehired as doorman, pulling late shifts with the added responsibility of closing duties.

To Bob, part of the lure of the job was being in the public eye; the doorman was a front man and Mr. Search let Bob choose his own wardrobe. Wearing a sports jacket, tie, and captivating smile, he made an alluring presence at the theater door at 6' 1 ½" and 160 pounds.



*Bob Ihrig on his way to work*

The rest of the crew dressed in nifty usher and usherette uniforms, which seemed only fitting as proper attire in the resplendent architecture of the two buildings.

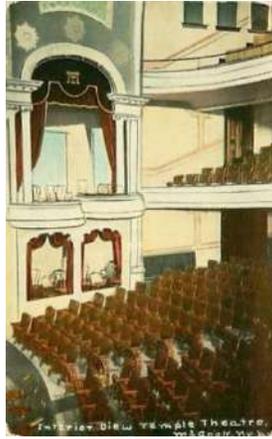
Built in 1927, the Fox was a bold example of art deco architecture on the High Plains. Overhanging the sidewalk the lavish marquee flashed its invitation in neon and sparkle. The stacked lights spelling F-O-X stretched to the sky in announcement of glamor and glitz to be discovered here, even in McCook, Nebraska.



*The Fox Theater, McCook, Nebraska*

The Temple Opera House on the corner of Norris Avenue and West D was one of Nebraska's first and finest vaudeville theaters. Built at the turn of the century, it featured three balconies and seats for over eleven hundred. The heavy ornate Victorian furniture and faded maroon velvet curtains were badly worn, but Bob recognized the theater's charm and loved looking at the yellowed posters of past performers on the walls.

Bats congregated in the dusty attic and the upper balcony was safely cordoned off. Repairs were expensive and not worth the effort except for the placement of a motion picture screen onto the stage.



*Temple Opera House, McCook, Nebraska*

The older McCookites favored the musty Temple while the younger crowd preferred the Fox. In those days nearly everyone went to the movies because even though black and white television sets were beginning to appear, the sets were expensive and very few people could afford them.

So it was an enticing fringe benefit for Mr. Search to let the employees watch shows when they were off-duty. It was good for business to have a packed house and Bob and his coworkers often took advantage of the added perk.

Bob knew all the popular stars: Cary Grant, Gary Cooper, Humphrey Bogart, Jimmy Stewart, Spencer Tracy, John Wayne, Ava Gardner, Paulette Goddard, Ingrid Bergman, Gene Tierney, Rita Hayworth, Ann Sothorn, Olivia de Havilland, Judy Garland, Lauren Bacall, Ann Sheridan, and the lovely and incomparable Miss Katharine Hepburn.

Everything about the entertainment business energized Bob – the actors and actresses, the musicians, the gorgeous women of the screen, the expensive cars, the mansions, and the fame.

He dreamed of going to Hollywood after two years at McCook College, and his friends and coworkers encouraged him in following his dreams.

For a young man soon to be twenty, there were a number of possible career options and another choice Bob thought about was coaching. But his mother Clara didn't like either career and Bob confided in Nellie Snee, an older employee, about his mother's disapproval.

At the Temple, Nellie was a ticket clerk who had been selling at the box office since the early days of vaudeville. She doted on Bob and was a constant source of support. She listened to his escapades and cheered him up when he felt down.

One day she found Bob staring at a poster of Ann Sothern. When she teased him about his obvious infatuation, he gushed on and on, not about Miss Sothern, but about a dark haired girl in a white dress he had met at the Old Settlers Picnic.

Monday was day after tomorrow, and they were meeting at the soda fountain at Allen's Rexall Drug Store. Monday couldn't come soon enough.

### **Allen's Rexall Drug Store** *Indianola, Nebraska – August 1948*



*Dora Mae Chitwood in Indianola*

What made Allen's Rexall Drug Store in Indianola so popular were the Cherry Phosphates and Green Rivers. Dora Mae longed to try one of the concoctions, but there was never any money to spend on anything that wasn't an absolute necessity. Life's luxuries were not ever expected, yet maybe the boy she was meeting from McCook would treat her.

Allen's soda fountain was made of fashionable tiger oak, a slate counter top, and twirling wooden stools. The booths with tall-back benches that were all the rage enclosed the tables, dimly lit by stained-glass Coca-Cola lamps.

When Bob swung open the door of Allen's, he didn't see Dora Mae. But he saw the Rock-Ola juke box, stopped and scanned the tunes, flipped in a nickel and watched Dinah Shore's "Buttons and Bows" drop onto the turntable.

When Dora Mae heard the music break the silence in the little store, she peaked out of the booth where she was hiding, and winked at Bob invitingly.

He liked this girl's spunkiness, and guessed her age at eighteen.

Dora Mae knew the big-city boy had a nice car and expensive clothes, so why was he paying attention to her?

Bob settled in across from Dora Mae and asked her what she'd like.

"A Green River," was her quick response.

After two Green Rivers were delivered to their table, Bob asked her about her people, hoping he could learn more about her. And surprising herself, she told him all she knew about the Chitwoods and Willeys.

## **The Willey Homestead** *Furnas County, Nebraska – 1912*



*The Willey Homestead, Furnas County, Nebraska*

Dora Mae's parents, Verl Chitwood and Faye Irene Willey, were neighbors whose families homesteaded adjoining farms in Furnas County, south of Beaver City, Nebraska.

In 1912, Faye's father, Wilson Alonzo Willey, laid claim to 160 acres as part of Lincoln's Homestead Act. The adjacent farm had already been claimed by Verl's granddaddy, Joshua Chitwood.

Everyone called Wilson Willey by his middle name, Alonzo, and Alonzo was a restless soul, an untamed child, a troubled man.

His parents had immigrated to Nebraska in a covered wagon, homesteaded near Alma, and opened a hotel there.

But they lost the hotel and land to legal fees because Alonzo was charged with killing a man over a poker game in a boxcar. Wandering a gambling circuit, Alonzo never cast off his unsettled lifestyle.

Buffalo Bill's Wild West Shows appealed to Alonzo and he became a Rough Rider, preferring to spend his time with William F. Cody, Will Rogers, Annie Oakley, Pawnee Bill, Geronimo, Calamity Jane, Black Elk, and Chief Sitting Bull.



*Wilson Alonzo Willey, Alma, Nebraska*

From two wives, Alonzo had ten children: Glen, Ruth, Mary, Eva, Robert, Faye, Lawrence, Deveda, Norris, and Jimmy. With his second wife and all the children, they moved to the Beaver City area, and built the largest barn in Furnas County. It had twenty-nine stalls to

accommodate two hundred head of Jersey milk cows, plus plenty of space for horses, hogs, and chickens.

Nothing was easy about farm life. They were up at four to start chores and tend to the milking. There was corn to plant, animals to feed, pasture fences to mend, gardens to grow, eggs to gather, hogs to slop, and wood to chop.

They canned vegetables from the garden, dug potatoes and onions for storage in the underground cellar, and made a weekly trip to Beaver City or Norton, Kansas to sell milk and cream and eggs.

Summer's heat scorched the crops and burned out the families. With little or no rain, the dust churned in the wind and blanketed the land and every living thing.

Winter's cold threatened the livestock while the farmers fought for their own survival in the frigid clime.

Bob appeared to be wrapped up in the story, so Dora Mae kept telling it.

The Willeys struggled every day.

There was no plumbing, no electricity, and the only heat came from an inefficient wood burning stove. They prayed for money to buy shoes and boots or that the children could fit into last year's pairs.

To numb the senses and relieve the onslaught of inevitable aches and pains, Alonzo distilled his own crude corn mash whiskey.

Drinking was a common thread in the Willey bloodline and may have contributed to Alonzo's early death in 1926 at the age of 53.

The oldest boy still at the farm was Lawrence; and at age 7 he took over the duties of butchering. Faye was ten and she took over the care of her younger sister and three brothers.

Hard work and the battle to survive was the daily order.



*Faye Irene Willey with younger brother Jimmy Willey*

## **The Chitwood Homestead** *Furnas County, Nebraska – 1880*

Next to the Willey farm, Joshua Chitwood had laid claim to his land around 1880. He and his wife Martha were some of the earliest settlers in Furnas County. They had three daughters, but the first two died at birth. Soon afterward, they had a son Jesse, followed by another daughter, Inez.



*Joshua and Martha Chitwood wearing an Abraham Lincoln button*

Next to the Willey farm, Joshua Chitwood had laid claim to his land around 1880. He and his wife Martha were some of the earliest settlers in Furnas County. They had three daughters, but the first two died at birth. Soon afterward, they had a son Jesse, followed by another daughter, Inez.

Jesse Earl Chitwood took over the homestead, and had four children with his wife Floretta. Their first son died at birth, but then came Clysta, Pearl, and Verl. With dire complications at Verl's birth, Floretta died.

Knowing he could not farm and care for three children at the same time, Jesse put an ad in the *Denver Post* for a live-in nanny. A recent widow, Mary Elizabeth Lamb, answered the ad and moved to Nebraska with her two young daughters.

Within two years, Jesse and Mary Elizabeth married. Jesse was a gentle and fair man, admired by his children, but Verl was not fond of his stepmother even though she raised him. He thought she favored her own daughters, which was certainly the case, but undoubtedly, Verl longed for his own mother, and Mary Elizabeth could never take her place.

The Willeys and Chitwood families were good neighbors and depended on one another when help was needed. The children went to the same country school and the adults socialized at the same village church.

Verl Chitwood was four when the Willeys arrived, and he was eight when Faye Irene was born. Verl courted Faye when she was fourteen and they married the next year in May of 1932, in the midst of the Great Depression.



*First Photo: Verl Chitwood on the right with three buddies  
Second Photo: Faye Irene Willey & Verl Chitwood on their wedding day*

Faye insisted that their first child be born in a hospital. Midwives were reliable, efficient, and inexpensive, but Faye took a notion that her baby would be delivered by a doctor, and Verl always gave her what she asked for, which was never very much.

So on August 23, 1932, the Chitwood's daughter Dora Mae was born in the community hospital at Norton, Kansas.

Verl had already moved into the Willey household to help run the farm. With another baby, the census bureau counted fifteen persons living in the three bedroom farmhouse.



*Verl holding Dora Mae with Faye and her sister with her baby*

The pitiful living conditions and uncertainty of livelihood at the Willey farm were common in most other rural families. Brutal heat, dust storms, and lack of water led to distressed crops and consequent starving livestock. With inadequate food and water, the cattle became weak and were unable to resist the disease that inevitably results from poor nutrition.

Farmers hurried to the slaughter houses with their livestock, but they were too late. Most of the meat was already contaminated and the Department of Agriculture was notified.

The government responded quickly and sent federal agents to the farms to run tests. If the animals were found to be diseased, the agents were instructed to dig large holes, burn the affected animals, and bury what they had burned.

Naturally, the farmers protested the actions of the Department of Agriculture, but they were told that without these drastic measures, there would have been a deadly epidemic.

Despite the meager penance for the two hundred head of cattle, not counting horses, hogs, and chickens, the loss threw the Willeys into bankruptcy. The plight was the same for the Chitwoods and many of their neighbors.

On the day the bank came to Jesse Chitwood's farm to foreclose on his family's homestead, he swore he'd never step foot inside a bank again. And he kept his promise.



*Jesse Earl Chitwood*

## **Tenant Farmers** *Indianola, Red Willow County, Nebraska – 1945*



*Jesse Alonzo Chitwood and Dora Mae Chitwood*

Living on this unmerciful prairie was a heavy weight.

The families found ways to move forward but they carried the load of those times with them the rest of their lives.

Verl and Faye bounced around for the next several years, but who could say if they ever bounced back.

After work as a hired hand, Verl managed to rent 950 acres of dryland some eight miles southeast of Indianola in Red Willow County. The rental agreement was simple: the Chitwoods paid all the expenses, did all the work, but took only half the profit from the crops, with the easy half going to the land owner.

They moved to the farm when Dora Mae was thirteen and her brother Jesse was ten. Jimmy was just a baby. Faye had named him after her youngest brother, Jimmy Willey, whom she had doted on when he was in her care.

As tenant farmers, the Chitwoods milked cows, raised livestock, grew corn, and worked as hard if not harder than they had on the Willey homestead.

There were fewer bodies to do all the work and everyone was expected to pitch in. Faye took care of the house and the garden and milked the cows. Dora Mae did the work of two boys and tried to get her brother Jesse to help.

But Jesse Alonzo Chitwood hated the farm and hated the work, just like his grandfather Wilson Alonzo Willey before him. Jesse dreamed of leaving the farm and talked about it all the time with his sister Dora Mae.

They both knew they'd eventually leave the farm, but Dora Mae patiently did her chores as long as she was there, whereas Jesse tried to avoid the work as long as he possibly could. Consequently, friction built up between Verl and his older son, which naturally led to excuses for Jesse from Faye.



*Dora Mae and Jesse Alonzo Chitwood on their farm*

At church and school affairs, Jesse's lively personality kept him in the spotlight while his mother stood in the background smiling her support.

Verl stood with the men, smoking and telling jokes, gaining some meager pleasure in a brief break from the grueling work on the farm.

Every Sunday there was a fried chicken dinner and it fell on the only girl to help Faye with the cooking. Dora Mae crossed the yard to the old hen house, captured a young chicken, and rung her neck. After she chopped off the head, she hung it upside down till the flopping stopped. Then she doused it in boiling water, plucked the feathers off, and properly butchered it.

After dredging the cut-up pieces in flour, salt, and pepper, Dora Mae and her mom fried the breasts, thighs, legs, wings, neck, gizzard, heart, and liver in lard in a huge Griswold cast iron skillet. The skillet was so heavy that Dora Mae struggled to move it atop the black wood-burning stove, but she managed it and the whole meal by herself if Faye was burdened with other work.

From the chicken drippings, they made gravy for mashed potatoes and boiled sweet corn grown in the kitchen garden. If the corn wasn't ripe yet, the vegetables might be green beans or peas or okra.

Faye baked bread or rolls or cornbread or biscuits for every meal, every day.

And everything had butter on it, made from cream, milked from a cow, churned in the red Daisy butter churn, and turned for hours by some unlucky child who was assigned the tedious task.

Besides the cream for butter followed cream for whipped topping for cakes and on special occasions cream for homemade ice cream for apple pie, baked with apples from the ancient apple tree growing in the yard.

Getting food to the table was a farm wife's career. The wondrous aromas coming from that farmhouse kitchen drew the family into the house and around the table.

There they were so exhausted that they failed to comprehend these times were where their values were built, where their memories were made, and where growing up and growing old changed everything.

## **Indianola High School**

*Indianola, Nebraska – Fall 1947*



*Dora Mae with her youngest brother Jimmy Verlyn Chitwood*

At times, Dora Mae and Jesse snuck away to stage a horse race against each other and a few neighboring kids; and most of the time, Dora Mae won.

The country school was only a mile from the farm and the Chitwood children rode their horses there every day. Once at school, they spanked the horses, signaling them to return home. And every afternoon, Verl spanked the horses again, signaling them back to school.

In the autumn of 1947, Dora Mae was eligible to enter Indianola High School as a freshman, but transportation obstacles threatened her attendance. The cost of gas and driving time was too great a burden. Faye couldn't take her to school, not with milking chores and two-year old James Verlyn Chitwood to tend to. And it was out of the question for Verl to spend hours driving Dora Mae to and fro.

Dora Mae would be the first of her clan to go beyond eighth grade, so it was determined she would make the trip to town by horseback.

Either Tuffy was slow or the rider didn't judge the speed and distance correctly, and Dora Mae was late on her very first day. Being tardy meant a scolding from the principal and a reprimand for bringing a horse to school.

There was an elderly lady in town who needed a housekeeper and the principal put the Chitwoods in touch with her. The arrangement was settled for Dora Mae to cook and clean in exchange for room and board.

Her family would sorely miss her and her hard work. But she would go home on the weekends to help on the farm until Verl reinstated her in Indianola every Sunday evening.

Fitting in with the town students was difficult for Dora Mae. Some made her feel inferior and taunted her for bringing a horse to school. When one boy called her a derogatory name, she chased him for two blocks and caught up with him in the post office. When he didn't apologize, she slugged him in the face and broke his nose. After that, everyone knew not to mess with Dora Mae Chitwood.

Besides cleaning and cooking for the old woman, Dora Mae did the laundry and grocery shopping. And if she needed medicine, Dora Mae walked to Allen's Drug Store where she first noticed her classmates drinking Green Rivers and Cherry Phosphates.

To be indulging in a Green River now seemed to be the height of extravagance, and Dora Mae thanked Bob again for the treat after the soda jerk closed out the check.

Dora Mae described the high school to Bob, her handful of friends, and the dances she was learning. There was no plumbing or electricity on the farm, so the conveniences in town were a significant improvement, like the radio she had in her own room at the lady's house. The broadcasted music was different than the country music she was used to from county fairs, rodeos, and barn dances.

She would always cherish the familiar music from the fiddle players out in the country, but modern music, new to her, allured with its rhythm and flow.

Venturing a bold invitation, Dora Mae gave Bob directions to the lady's house and where her second floor bedroom was situated with the window overlooking the porch roof. She'd be a

sophomore soon; she'd be turning sixteen in two weeks; and she was ready for him to teach her some popular dance moves.

## **A Family Secret** *Alma, Harlan County, Nebraska – 1868*



*Dora Mae Chitwood with her blood mother Faye Irene (Willey) Chitwood*

Once in a while families have secrets. They don't talk about those secrets in private; and they certainly don't talk about them in public either.

That afternoon at Allen's, Dora Mae left out the story about Wilson Alonzo Willey's mother. Many claimed she was a full-blooded Native American, adopted and raised by white settlers, and re-named Mary Ellen Edwards. She was educated in a white school and when she turned sixteen in 1867, she married Wilson Issac Willey.

No one in the family remembered her tribe, but years after her passing, some said they had seen photographs of Mary Ellen dressed beautifully in authentic regalia, representative of her native-born race.

She was proud of her heritage, but discrimination pushed Mary Ellen and her husband to leave Indiana by covered wagon to relocate to Nebraska, where they homesteaded near Alma.

Relatives of Wilson Willey didn't approve of the inter-racial marriage because it disrupted their pure English bloodline which dated as far back as 1590 to Mr. Allen Willey, the respected Englishman from Alford, Lincolnshire, England.

Wilson Issac and Mary Ellen had eight children together and Wilson Alonzo Willey was their second born on the homestead. His family called him Alonzo so as to not confuse him with his father.

As the granddaughter of Alonzo, Dora Mae was the descendant of an American Indian. She understood society's view of bloodlines and the shame associated by some; so without much realization she ignored the stigma of this account and chalked it up to being a foolish tale.

## **Worlds Apart** *Indianola, Nebraska – August 1948*

Awaiting the approach of college, Bob wasn't looking for a steady girlfriend. Yet he was intrigued by Dora Mae Chitwood. Her bold spunk and sassiness appealed to him and he thought about her intently as he drove home to McCook.

She reminded him of Ann Sothern, one of his favorite Hollywood actresses. Miss Sothern's hair was blonde and short and curly; Dora Mae's was black and long and wavy. But their spirits were akin and Dora Mae showed a strength that few fifteen-year-olds possessed.

Being raised on a remote country farm, Dora Mae was a little unpolished, yet Bob thought she had potential, and her natural beauty was hard to ignore.

With a different hairstyle and a little make-up, she would be even more striking.

It's a bad idea to imagine making changes in somebody else, but Bob was just daydreaming, something he often did. He saw no harm in wanting to improve his life and Dora Mae's as well.

There were troubles and secrets in his family, too.

Since the slow dance at the Old Settlers Picnic, Dora Mae had begun to imagine a few real possibilities for herself. She wanted adventure and she wanted to be off the farm. Maybe Robert Carl Ihrig, the young man with the fancy car, maybe he could give her a ride.

That afternoon at Allen's, a bond developed between Dora Mae and Bob; still, the two of them were worlds far apart.



*Dora Mae Chitwood and Robert Carl Ihrig*

## **Fried Chicken and a Kiss** *Indianola, Nebraska – September 1948*

It was easy for Dora Mae to sneak out of the big house at night. No rules had been laid down, so she quietly descended the stairs and went out the back door without a sound.

Bob had been driving to Indianola after work several times a week to meet her at a designated spot not far from the old lady's home.

They sat in the Crosley for hours, talking and listening to music on the radio.

Bob would start classes at McCook Junior College in just one week, and he was bursting with anticipation of this new phase he was about to undertake.

College and a snazzy car and an impressive job – Dora Mae held Bob in the highest regard. And the fact that he was with her now made her feel as if every good thing was coming her way.

To impress him in return, she planned a special surprise.

One night she lugged a picnic basket to their parking place. The second she closed the car door, she pulled out what she had packed: fried chicken, potato salad, baked beans, and a sweet cherry pie for dessert.

The midnight meal positively impressed Bob. It was the best fried chicken he had ever tasted.

He figured she was fibbing when she said she made everything herself. How could a girl who just turned sixteen turn out food like this?

His own mother had never prepared anything even close to it. Clara Ihrig was a simple, necessary cook. In her kitchen cupboard were salt and pepper, sugar and cinnamon, and a small bottle of vanilla extract.

While Bob devoured a huge piece of cherry pie, Dora Mae bragged a bit about other dishes she could make – meatloaf, chicken pot pie, rancho beans, goulash, and roast beef stew with a bounty of onions and carrots and potatoes. The Chitwoods grew their own vegetables plus some herbs they used for cooking. Fresh ingredients were essential to Dora Mae’s culinary skills.

With his last bite of pie, Bob let out a satisfying sigh. As he reached for a Lucky Strike in his shirt pocket, Dora Mae leaned toward him for a quick kiss.

The evening had been full of surprises and Bob became bolder as his level of comfort with Dora Mae increased. “Do you smoke?” he asked, to which she answered no.

But she wanted to try a store-bought cigarette instead of the hand-rolled ones all the Chitwoods and Willeys smoked.

After some coaching from Bob, Dora Mae leaned back in the passenger seat and let smoke from the cigarette drift out the car window to mix with the humid late summer night air.

**Clara Christina Schnell**  
*Harvard, Nebraska – April 1906*

As he counted off the days before the start of college, Bob’s anxiety increased.

He worked extra shifts at the theaters, registered for classes, bought expensive textbooks, and met with the advisor who tried to dissuade him from pursuing a career in coaching.

Taken together, the mounting obligations gave him chest pains. Bob had always established his own pace, and it seemed to those observing him that he must be in some sort of race.

Besides pressures from the outside, there was constant friction with his mother at home, though he respected and loved her dearly. It was her over-vigilance on his behalf that set his heart pounding. But he was proud of her and what she had accomplished, all on her own.

Bob's mother was born Clara Christina Schnell in 1906, the daughter of immigrants from Russia.

Her father, Conrad Schnell, came to America with his family when he was fifteen.

The Schnells were Germans who had claimed a farmstead near the Volga River close to the settlement of Norka, Russia. Like other Germans, they had migrated to Russia in 1763 at the invitation of Catherine the Great.

In her Manifesto, the Russian Empress had promised Germans 165 free acres of land, thirty years with no taxes, and freedom to practice their own religion and to speak their own language. Plus, their German sons would never have to serve in the Russian Army.

It had been an offer that was too good to pass up and tens of thousands of Germans had accepted the deal, only to discover years later that the Empress's promises would not be kept.

Skilled German farmers had worked the Russian wilderness, transforming the area into productive fields and gardens. Even then, they were treated with contempt as foreigners. First, they were made to speak the Russian language. The younger men were forced to serve as Russian soldiers, but when they no longer were allowed to practice their own religion, the Germans began to look at other possibilities for their livelihood.

When they heard about the American President Abraham Lincoln signing the Homestead Act of 1863, the Germans in Russia started leaving in droves. One hundred and sixty acres of free land had been offered in the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, and Colorado.

Conrad Schnell and his family landed at the port of entry in New York harbor in 1877 and moved west. Twice, his father laid claims under the Homestead Act – first in Culbertson, Nebraska, and later in Oregon, losing their land both times. After the failed venture in Oregon, back to Nebraska they went, settling in Harvard, in Clay County.

By then, Conrad was a young man, and there in Harvard he met a young woman, Marquerite Schlitt. Her family had come from Russia too. She had been born in Dusseldorf, a small village near Norka.

Marquerite's grandfather had been mayor of Dusseldorf. The Schlitts had become respected and prominent land owners and merchants in Russia, but then with changing times, their status was lost and they were persecuted. Like many fellow Germans, they left Russia for America.

Like most immigrants, the Schnells and Schlitts faced hard times in their new country. The menial jobs they resorted to were humiliating, but integration into American culture and making life better for their children were their common goals.

With the passing of three generations, it seemed to Bob as if those two goals had been met, but Dora Mae didn't think it had happened for her own family.

Conrad and Marquerite married and made Harvard their home for the next thirty-two years. All six of their children were born there – Edna, Alma, Verna, Floyd, Clara, and Dennis.

Just when Clara was about to enter her senior year, the Schnells moved to Clay Center, Nebraska where Conrad had accepted a job. But the job didn't work out and Clara's father made

a hasty deal to buy a dairy farm north of Goodland, Kansas – a totally new undertaking for the determined and hard-working sixty-year old.

With all that, Clara managed to maintain strong marks. She stayed in Clay Center and graduated from high school as class Valedictorian in the spring of 1923.

She was awarded a partial scholarship of twenty-five dollars for any college in Nebraska; yet regrettably, there were no family funds to cover what the scholarship didn't.

**Miss Schnell – School Teacher**  
*North of Goodland, Kansas – Autumn 1923*



*Clara Christina Schnell*

Clara moved in with her parents north of Goodland and took a teaching position at a country school near the new dairy farm. With no experience at age seventeen and without any college, she accepted the role and began to set aside some money for college, while at the same time helping with home expenses.

Floyd and Dennis, Clara's brothers, worked the dairy, milking twice a day and growing hay for the cows. She tried to lend a hand with the chores, but dairy farm work didn't suit her, and because of that, she kept her focus on getting a teaching certificate.

All three of Clara's older sisters had already married and had homes of their own. Edna was Clara's inspiration. She had become an elementary school teacher and gave piano lessons.

At the beginning of Clara's second year of teaching, a tragic accident hit the family. Her brother Floyd had climbed into his pickup truck, unwittingly bumping the loaded shotgun casually propped against the seat.

The gun went off and Floyd cried out, "Mamma, call Papa! I'm shot!"

He died moments after.

That horrible event left Conrad angry and bitter. He blamed his own job failures as a catalyst in Floyd's death. Conrad felt that if he had been more successful in his earlier endeavors, the accident would never have occurred.

Floyd had been an honor student in high school, the senior class president, and had opportunities for careers far away from the dairy farm, but duty to his family and loyalty to his father had kept him on the farm.

Marguerite sought comfort in the German Reform church where her staunch and continual faith brought her hope.

Conrad never recovered.

## **The Ihrig Homestead** *Johnson, Nemaha County, Nebraska – 1881*

Neither did Clara.

Mourning the death of her brother and concerned for her parents, Clara poured even more effort into teaching.

Fortuitously, she met a young man a few months after Floyd's passing, whose family had just bought a dairy farm near the Schnell farm.

The young man was Carl Frederick Ihrig, and as Bob began to tell Dora Mae about his father, the tone changed.

She sensed a shadow looming over Bob, but he forged forward, determined to be honest about the Ihrig history.

Carl Frederick's father was Charles Frederick, and Charles Frederick's father was George Johann Ihrig.

According to family legend, George came to America as a stowaway, hidden in the captain's quarters for three days. He was just fifteen and was the first of his family to leave Germany. It was 1850.

George made his way to Illinois, where another relative had already settled. There he met Regina Johanna Moedinger, and they married and started a family.

The family traveled to Nebraska in a covered Conestoga wagon. They settled near Steamwagon Road outside Nebraska City in 1871. The fertile land was watered by the Missouri River a few miles to the east, but after five years, a severe drought ushered in a grasshopper plague.

The insects appeared out of nowhere, making loud whirling, rasping sounds. Hot, dry conditions had set the stage for an explosion in the grasshopper population. Millions of them dropped out of the sky like hail, darkening the day into a dreadful night of sticky, stinging pests.

They fed on crops and gardens and jumped into water wells. When all plant life had been consumed, they moved on to less nutritious sustenance. They ate wool off the sheep, harnesses off the horses, and paint off the wagons.

To protect themselves against grasshopper bites, settlers tied their sleeves and pants tightly to their wrists and ankles in an attempt to avoid the painful rash caused by the grasshopper spines.

After five years of war with the drought and grasshoppers, George and Regina moved to another community of German settlers near Johnson, Nebraska.

It was 1881, and the Homestead Act was still in effect, which provided them a farm there in Nemaha County.

With his family, George farmed the new land, relieved to be free from the grasshoppers, and re-established his blacksmithing trade.

Once the house and barn were built, they donated an acre of their land to the Evangelical Zion Lutheran Church. The brand-new church and cemetery would accommodate a growing Lutheran congregation in Johnson.

Volunteer workers and generous donations moved the church building project forward. For convenience, the professional building crew boarded at the Ihrig homestead.

The fine new church was dedicated in 1883. It was beautiful inside and out. George and Regina had planted flowers and shrubs around the church, and vegetable gardens and vineyards around the house. This plot of earth was a symbol of the things they believed in – hard work, stickability, integrity, farm and family, God and Country.



*Evangelical Zion Lutheran Church outside Johnson, Nebraska built by George Johann Ihrig  
George Johann Ihrig and Regina Johanna (Moedinger) Ihrig on their homestead*

## **Charles Frederick Ihrig** *Born in Hollowayville, Illinois – 1869*

Six children were born to George and Regina – Johanna, George Jr., Charles, Wilhelm, Charlotte, and Lydia.

The church they built was the center of their family life. At mealtimes, they recited a German prayer, and every evening before bedtime they took turns reading from the old German Bible, then said prayers on their knees for fifteen minutes and more.

George and Regina raised the children with a full measure of sternness, and pushed their third child Charles to be a minister. But he had other ideas, choosing instead to be a farmer.

Though Charles didn't fulfill his father's long-held dream for him to be a pastor, he stayed on the family homestead and made a living in agriculture.

Before the Ihrig's moved to Johnson, Charles had worked at the nearby J. Sterling Morton mansion west of Nebraska City. He was just eight when the stable master hired him as a stable boy, though he helped with the gardens and orchards, which was what he loved most.

In the likeness of the White House, Julius Sterling Morton had built an extravagant thirty room mansion on his 160 acre estate. He owned and operated the local newspaper and before that he had served as Governor of the Nebraska Territory and Secretary of Agriculture under two Presidents – Grover Cleveland and William McKinley. His oldest son, Joy Morton, founded the Morton Salt Company, and his youngest son, Paul Morton, became Secretary of the Navy under President Teddy Roosevelt.

Young Charles Ihrig loved the constant bustle of activity at the mansion with influential politicians, businessmen, and dignitaries regularly coming and going.

With the means to do so, J. Sterling acquired and planted a variety of rare heirloom apple trees and studied the latest in agricultural methods. He used his knowledge for instruction of

those willing to learn the newest modern techniques of horticulture and founded Arbor Day as a national reminder to plant a tree. It was a lasting legacy and for J. Sterling Morton, his highest achievement.



*J. Sterling Morton's mansion outside Nebraska City*

## **Rose Elizabeth Perrenoud** *Born in Ponts-de-Martel, Switzerland – 1871*

When Charles had been on the Morton estate for two years, he was introduced to a new employee, Rose Elizabeth Perrenoud. At age eight, Rose was hired as one of the ladies' maids and made beds, did laundry, set the table, and served the meals. Some of the mending duties fell on her, and she became intrigued with fashion.

She began to sew for some of the staff, and constructed charming and well-made garments for them. Her employers noticed her talents and she rose through the ranks of servants.

When Charles' parents made plans to move to Johnson, Nebraska, he begged them to let him stay at the mansion. After all, he was twelve by then, but they wouldn't even consider it, so Charles went with his family, separated from Rose by thirty-two miles, though they saw one another when Charles made the trip to Nebraska City for farm supplies.

Eventually, Rose became personal assistant to J. Sterling's wife, Carolina Joy Morton. Rose had her own room in the mansion, a symbol of her ranking among the servants. Besides her sewing skills, she could set an elegant table, and she played the piano for Mrs. Sterling most evenings.

But Rose wanted to be married and have a family all her own. She was thoughtful and deeply religious and she subscribed to the somewhat revolutionary thinking of the day which focused on joy and happiness in the spiritual life.

Both she and Charles leaned toward this experience which differed from their parents who had followed the teachings of Martin Luther with stern and rigid stoicism. Their countering views caused friction in the family, leaving Charles especially at odds with his father.

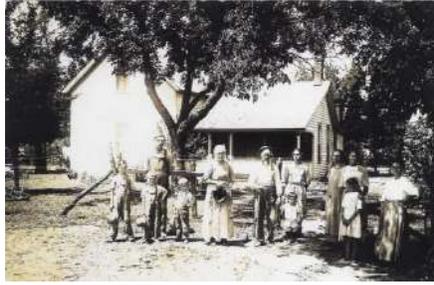
Charles and Rose married in 1892 when he was twenty-three and she was twenty-one. They made their home in the place Charles had helped build with his family on the Ihrig homestead.

Rose's wish came true when their first baby arrived ten months after the wedding. Ultimately, nine children were born, one after the other, all delivered on the homestead. There was Lydia, then Viola, Gertrude, then Esther, and Carl, Clara, Irwin, Arthur, and Oscar.

As youngsters, they were put to work on the farm, supervised by parents and stern grandparents whose child-rearing philosophies didn't match that of the children's parents. It was yet another thing besides religion and farming that Charles and his father did not agree on.

After just twenty-three years of marriage, Rose died, leaving Charles a widower and their children motherless. On the day of her funeral, Johnson closed its schools and businesses in respectful mourning – the loss of one so loved by so many.

The funeral services were held at the Evangelical Zion Lutheran Church – the very church built by Charles and his family. Unexpected by those attending that day, the funeral procession made its way to the community cemetery in town, with no discussion or explanation from Charles as to why Rose had not been laid to rest in the cemetery beside the Zion Church.



*Charles Frederick Ihrig with his children and parents, George and Regina, on the Ihrig homestead shortly after Rose passed*

## **Kansas Dairy Farm**

### *North of Goodland, Kansas – March 1925*

It was ten years later when Charles made the surprising decision to move off the homestead, and bought a dairy farm three miles north of Goodland, Kansas.

Charles was 55 years old by then and had grown restless in Johnson, ready for a new challenge in a new place.

His younger children moved with him and adapted to the work of a small herd of dairy cows. To feed the livestock, they planted corn, wheat, and hay, plowed with an iron plow, pulled by horses, steered by a young Ihrig.

Charles' parents never went to Goodland to visit their son and grandchildren. By the time George mellowed out and decided to go, he and Regina were too old.

George Ihrig died at the age of 94 and was laid to rest in Zion Cemetery, interred on the land he had donated.

With differences set finally aside, Charles went to George's funeral and buried the bickering between father and son.



*Charles Frederick Ihrig with his nine children and grandchild  
Carl Frederick Ihrig is the oldest boy in the upper right corner*

## **Carl Frederick Ihrig** *Johnson, Nebraska – December 1902*

Charles' fifth child and first son was Carl. Being the first son put him in the luckless position of being the foremost male child in the line of fire from his father's constant corrective custody.

His mother Rose coddled him and his four sisters worshipped him, which only made the antagonism with his father more explicit.

To the females, Carl was gregarious and charming. The ongoing pranks and his jokes, delivered with a devilish grin, endeared him to the girls at school, who boldly asked for kisses from the cute young boy.

Carl went to church every Sunday and during the week as well, but he'd rather be doing almost anything else, even going to school.

To get to school, the children walked a mile and a half into town on the dusty road that became a muddy bog when it rained. On occasion, Grandpa George pitied the nine youngsters and gave them a ride in his horse-drawn buggy. Cowhides covered their heads, though that was not enough protection to keep out the cold.



*Carl next to Charles, while Rose is holding Oscar*

Carl loved drawing, but Charles thought art was a waste of time and knew it was certainly something Carl could never make a living from. His artistic ability spilled over to music. Rose had taught Carl to read music and play piano and organ. When Carl jazzed up the

church hymns he was supposed to be playing with solemnity, his father and grandfather disapproved.

“By the Light of the Silvery Moon” had gained the attention of young Americans nearing the 1920s and Carl was practicing the song one day, with his sisters singing along as they stood around the old family piano.

Grandpa George entered the parlor at the sound of the secular tune and advanced on the group with his blood boiling. It was his house and he laid down the new edict: no more secular music would be allowed – only hymns from then on.

When Rose died so young, Carl lost the best part of his life. His mother’s love and encouragement were gone for him at age twelve and what was left was a damaged spirit.

He dropped out of high school and began to hang out in questionable places other than the farm, where he should have been working if he wasn’t in school.

By the time Carl was eighteen he was off the farm much of the time which upset his close-knit family. They knew he was up to no good and most of the time they were right.

When Carl turned twenty-one, he was already a regular at the speakeasies, where he drank, played poker, and lavished his winnings on pretty women.

When he ran low on cash, he’d turn his hat into a bucket and sit at the piano, playing for tips. He’d perform all the popular tunes, with a few jazzed up hymns thrown in for good measure. But his favorite genre was ragtime and the crowd flipped coins into his hat as they moved quickly to the dance floor.

A friend of Carl’s had introduced him to the radio, a new invention that had listeners captivated by weather reports, farm market news, and variety shows. For Carl, broadcasted music was the fascination, especially ragtime, which he captured on a signal out of Omaha.

According to Carl, the best was Scott Joplin, the King of Ragtime, whose “Maple Leaf Rag,” “Pineapple Rag,” and “The Entertainer” were his favorites. He learned Joplin’s songs from sheet music, but after he improvised them, he added the songs to his repertoire.

Playing music and cards seemed to Carl to be an easier way to make a living than working on the farm. He set out on an underground gambling circuit, but after only a couple years he had collected heavy debts and serious trouble, so he sought an escape to Denver or Kansas City or Chicago where he could hide from the people he owed money to and get lost where no one knew his past.

Just as Carl was planning his next move, his father bought the dairy farm in Kansas, and after a long talk between father and son, Carl agreed to help his father.

Loyalty to family and a sense of obligation moved Carl to Kansas. The work there was endlessly exhausting, and it made Carl second-guess the decision he had made.

But then, he began to notice a young girl walking down the country road.



*Carl Frederick Ihrig*

## **Carl and Clara Ihrig** *Goodland, Kansas – August 1925*

The girl walked slowly, weighed down by a burden of textbooks.

Carl stopped alongside her in the truck and offered her a ride, but she politely declined, keeping her eyes diverted to the gravel beneath her unfashionable shoes.

After that, he passed her on the stretch of road several more times, pausing to extend an invitation for a lift, yet each time the answer was no.

Being turned down made Carl curious and he asked around town until he found out that she was the teacher at the country schoolhouse not far from his father's dairy farm. His sources said that her parents also owned a dairy and it was close by to his own.

One Saturday in town, Carl saw the school teacher by chance. She was coming out of the public library, her arms weighed down by a burden of library books.

He parked the truck and hurried toward her; and this time, she stopped and smiled.

She was Clara Christina Schnell, but she always wanted to be Christine instead. Blushing, she admitted knowing already that they were neighbors.

He was a bit pushy when he asked if he could call on her. But his smile made her reluctantly agree.

She had no experience in being with young men, and mostly they all seemed awkward and silly to her. Yet Carl was different and she was eager to see him again.

Gradually, he was invited to dinner at the Schnell's. Then he was invited to stay after dinner. Then he was the evening entertainment at the Schnell's piano, playing jazzed down hymns, and knowing how much Clara's parents were like his grandparents.

Carl didn't dress like the other country folk Clara knew. He wore fancy clothes and a spiffy hat. His wavy brown hair wasn't just cut; it was styled like a movie star's – slicked back on top and shaved up on the sides.

Clara was bookish and shy, and Carl liked that about her. He also liked the fact that she had a career and had plans and dreams of her own.

After a couple months of movies and dancing and eating out, Carl proposed. He approached it as a practical matter. They both were unhappy living with parents, and if they moved to town, they could get good jobs, make more money, and get away from the grueling farm work.

Clara had never been so quick to make so big a decision. She knew Carl was smart. He was talented and handsome, tender and adventuresome.

How could it be a mistake for two people who loved each other to be united?

On that account in August 1925, Carl Frederick Ihrig married Clara Christina Schnell in a quiet private ceremony.



*Wedding Photo of Carl Frederick Ihrig and Clara Christina (Schnell) Ihrig*

**Goodland, Kansas**  
*514 Caldwell Avenue – August 1925*

Charles was outraged.

Given his son's recent past, he knew marriage should have been the last thing on Carl's mind.

Without even knowing the young school teacher, Charles took an immediate distrust of Clara and her entire family and blamed them for Carl's abandonment of the Ihrig family farm.

Clara's parents liked Carl and had been thoroughly entertained on the evenings he spent with them, but it seemed too quick too soon, yet they still gave the marriage their blessing and supported the young couple in their new life together.

Carl and Clara bought an empty lot on the outskirts of town. A field of wild grass and flowers grew between them and their closest neighbors on Coffee Mill Row.

The houses there had been constructed by the Rock Island Railroad for the rail workers in the 1890s. The tiny twenty-four foot square dwellings were built quickly on the cheap with a chimney stack in the middle and shiplap and sheath on the exterior. The shanties stood in a row with hardly a side yard between them, their roofs resembling coffee grinder lids.

Clara's father and brother Dennis helped Carl build a home on the lot north of the shanties. It was nicer than the houses on Coffee Mill Row, but not much larger. Still, the newlyweds were elated the day they moved into their residence at 514 Caldwell Avenue, ready to start married life as homeowners.

The distance to the country school was too far, so Clara found work in town and took a job waiting tables at the Hotel Neu on Main Street, about a mile from their new home.

Since the café was open twenty-four hours, she pulled evenings and graveyards and split shifts, which sent her walking a path from home and back several times a day.

Clara didn't have a license to drive and never applied for one. She was terrified at the thought of getting in the driver's seat because her brother Floyd had died behind the wheel even though he wasn't driving at the time of his fatal accident.

Carl wanted instant success, and things were not lining up the way he envisioned. He settled on driving a truck for Standard Oil, but filling gas tanks on farms made him impatient.

In the first couple years, the young couple continued doing things they both had enjoyed during their courtship. They took scenic road excursions, ate picnics in the park, and rode the Ferris wheel at county fairs.

Restless, Carl spent beyond his means, buying Clara swanky clothes, shoes and hats in the finest stores in Goodland. He bought her an upright piano and she taught herself to play.

Even with their money struggles, Clara was content and happy and considered herself to be one of the luckiest girls in the whole world. And when the doctor told her she was pregnant, she was thrilled beyond belief, knowing a baby would make them a perfect family.

## **Robert Carl Ihrig** *Goodland, Kansas – September 1928*

For Carl though, nothing was perfect. He felt he was in a worthless job going nowhere. He sensed that Clara's job was below her and he hated that she was gone so much, but when they were both at home together, they argued without end, resulting in the beginnings of a damaged relationship.

Often when Clara had a day off, Carl was gone, and she had no idea of his whereabouts. He was back at it – playing piano at the speakeasies, his hat overturned for tips and the tips going for booze and gambling.

Expecting a baby somehow diminished some of Clara's other worries. She hoped Carl would welcome the new child and settle down to a more domestic existence. But Carl saw the responsibility as an added weight and the pressure mounted with each passing day.

There was pressure on Clara, too, and she knew their income would be affected once the baby came. She continued waiting tables until the last two weeks of her pregnancy. Some of her co-workers with cars and enough money for gas drove her home from work and her boss did not schedule her for split shifts when she reached the seventh month.

Walking the distance to work gave her time to brood over some things and dream about others, like going to college; and most especially, about being a mom.

A month after the Ihrig's third anniversary, as the sun rose on September 23, 1928, a baby son was born. Robert Carl Ihrig entered the world in the little house on Caldwell Avenue and instantly became Clara's pride and joy.

## **Hole in His Heart**

### *Goodland, Kansas – September 1932*

The stock market had crashed in October of 1929 and the ripple effect was the Great Depression.

A jackrabbit plague coupled with a severe drought cursed the Kansas plains for several seasons in the 1930s.

The railroad had been laying off workers and it affected local businesses. Stores on Main Street closed. Prices on milk, eggs, and flour soared.

With the black cloud of economic pessimism hanging over the country, Carl and Clara were lucky to have jobs and they both knew it.

Carl's job paid \$36.00 every two weeks and Clara made three cents an hour, plus tips, usually pennies left by other strapped Kansans.

The Ihrig's personal debts mounted, all while worries about their son weighed on Clara.

When Robert Carl was four he began falling down more often and seemed to lack the strength to get back up. Young "Bob," as he was nicknamed, complained of chest pains and his parents took him to the hospital.

The doctors made the diagnosis of congenital heart disease and it was then that Carl and Clara first heard the worrisome sentence: "Your son was born with a hole in his heart."

There was no treatment prescribed other than reduction of physical exertion and “watchful waiting.”

The doctors told Bob that he should monitor his condition and control his own activity.

Dutifully, Clara carried out the doctors’ orders, fussing at Bob to limit his play, forcing him to rest, and scolding him when he competed with the neighbor kids.

Every time Bob went outdoors, Clara was nervous, worried about further damage to his heart; or worse, an untimely death.

Her hypervigilance and constant nagging led to arguments and resentment from her son.



*Clara Christina (Schnell) Ihrig and her son, Robert Carl Ihrig, nicknamed “Bob”*

## **June LaVaughn Ihrig** *Goodland, Kansas – March, 1933*

Just six months after Bob’s diagnosis, a sister was born. Clara named her June LaVaughn.

Bob was happy for a playmate – even a girl; and moreover, he was happy his mother had someone else to worry about.

Despite the medical bills resulting from Bob’s heart condition and the family’s swelling depression debt, Carl welcomed the new baby girl with joy.



*Robert Carl & June LaVaughn Ihrig*

Carl's father Charles' farm was not too far from town, but the hard feelings that had heaped up in years past put a division between the families, and Charles was missing out on a closeness expected between grandparents and grandchildren.



*Bob, June, and Clara at 514 Caldwell Avenue, Goodland, Kansas*

Then out of the blue, Charles invited Carl and the family to spend Christmas on the farm. Carl and Clara readily accepted, knowing that peace was better than a cold war.

Bob was seven and June, two and a half. Bob's Christmas gift was a wagon and June's, a doll. The gifts were rare treasures and the time spent together even more rare.

The atmosphere that holiday was strained. The other siblings were comfortable together, went to church together, and went to other social events together. They knew the same people, shared the same gossip, and laughed at the same jokes.

Carl and Clara were bound by blood, but they were outsiders and they would always be so.

Charles made an effort to mend the relationship, but it was too little too late. Just two days after that cold Christmas of 1935, he died unexpectedly at home.

## Delivering Milk

*Goodland, Kansas – Summer 1936*



*Bob pulling June in the Christmas wagon from Grandpa Charles Ihrig*

Services for Charles were held at the Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Goodland. The eulogy would have been a message of upright character and a commendation for a life of hard work. It would have been about his fair dealings, keeping his word, and loving God.

The children buried him in Nebraska, next to his beloved wife Rose who he had missed every day since her passing those many years before.

With Charles gone, the three loyal sons who were with him on the farm carried the enterprise on. Irwin, Arthur, and Oscar inherited the land and the dairy business; and with it, the sufferings of drought and plagues.

Yet the rigors of farm life made them strong, and success came to the three sons and to the generations after them.

In the summer of 1936, young Bob's uncles Irwin, Arthur, and Oscar hired him to deliver milk. While the Ihrig milk truck rolled through Goodland, Bob sprinted to each customer's porch, left a full glass milk bottle, and picked up the empty.

He was allowed to deliver milk only in the summer so as to not interfere with school and only if he didn't overdo. Even on the milk route he felt his mother's watchful eye was ever upon him.

## **Field of Dreams**

### *Goodland, Kansas – Autumn 1937*

Six days a week or seven, Clara put in twelve-hour shifts at the Hotel Neu, so she set her father Conrad in charge of Bob and June.

In 1937, Conrad had lost his dairy farm to the bank. Clara's mother, Marquerite, had died the same winter as her father-in-law, Charles Ihrig.

Clara was the only Schnell remaining in Kansas since her younger brother Dennis had gone to McCook, Nebraska, to be with his two older sisters and finish his senior year.

It fell on Clara to care for Conrad when he was diagnosed with cancer of the mouth. There was no money for other provisions in those depressing years, so Conrad moved in with Carl and Clara, into the tiny four-room house on Caldwell Avenue.

Conrad's bed was the living room sofa, where he coughed and spat and barked at Bob and June. He sent them outdoors to play while he groaned and moaned alone in pain.

Bob and June stayed outside for hours to avoid the sounds and smells of their grandfather's advancing and awful cancer. Clara never knew Conrad had turned the children loose to run free, and they certainly never told their mother.

Two years later, Conrad died of the cancer consuming him; and although they never said it aloud, everyone was relieved.

Clara hired a high school girl as nanny after classes; and while she cooked supper, Bob and June ran free again, fleeing to the vacant fields along Caldwell.

After dishes and homework, they went to bed at nine, and in keeping with the arrangement, the nanny locked the little house and walked home.

The arrangements had been made and paid by Clara because she had come to expect that absentee Carl wouldn't be home. That's just the way things were.

And June had come to expect that Bob got all the attention. That's just the way things were.

At home, the focus was on Bob and his heart condition. At play, the focus was on Bob and his natural-born leadership.

Dreams were rehearsed and Bob's imagination found root in that fertile field. He invented games, set the rules, and orchestrated the whole business. Bob's sidekicks were the kids from Coffee Mill Row. They followed his coaching and felt lucky to be part of the action.

He bought make-believe costumes with his own milk delivery money, and acted out the parts he assigned to himself. The plays might be about finding a band of renegade Indians or a cast of law enforcement officers hunting for Bonnie and Clyde.

The kids cleared paths through the tall weeds of summer, tracks for bike races, roads and bridges for toy trucks and cars, and a shortcut to an amateur ball diamond.

Bob organized baseball teams and games, then coached the opposing squads and pitched and took his turn at bat. He kept at it until he became the star pitcher and hitter. Satisfaction came when his dreams came true; hitting a home run or pitching a no-hitter. Win, win, win!



*Bob on top of the clothesline pole in the field with friends – June and Bob in dress-up – Bob on his new bike from Carl*

## **Fatherhood**

### *Sherman County, Kansas – Summer 1939*

The children weren't home alone, though. They had their pets – a crow, a kitten, a badger, and an odd rooster named Old Herkimer. There were two baby goats that stunk and a pair of skunks that had been relieved of their scent.

Of course, all the pets didn't live on Caldwell Avenue at the same time. One by one they went away, all except for Skipper. He was a keeper – loyal, obedient, and good-natured.

Bob and June never questioned where the animals came from. They only knew their father would arrive home in the morning after a night of moonlighting, wearing a suit and a tie and his lucky hat, an animal tucked under his arm, the winnings from an illegal card game in lieu of the cash he would rather have had.

Fatherhood didn't come easy for Carl. It came in spurts and quickly sputtered away. There was no consistency in his attention to the children; and consequently, they came to view his very attendance with the family as a surprise.

Out of the blue one day Carl took Bob and June to the new A&W Root Beer Drive-In. They had never ever eaten out, and certainly never in the car, with the hamburgers and root beer delivered to them on a special tray that sat sturdily outside the car door window. Nothing would ever again taste so delightful.

Then, a profoundly rare phenomenon gave Clara and Carl an evening off together in 1940 at fair time.

The Sherman County Fair was an all-out event. Civic men's groups and women's clubs and church members ran the concession stands selling hamburgers and hot dogs, popcorn, cotton candy, and snow cones.

Gardeners brought roses, quilters brought quilts, and bakers bought pies, cakes, and cookies. Pickled beets and cucumbers, green beans, and corn on the cob were displayed and judged and a few were deemed worthy of a prized purple, blue, or red ribbon.

Four H-ers showed livestock and farmers exhibited tractors and other implements.

Everyone hoped his entry would go to the Kansas State Fair, but only the best of Sherman County would stand the test, advancing to the state competition in Hutchinson.

As the little family strolled down the Midway, Bob listened to the carnies barking their enticements on gimmicks and games of chance. He wandered off when he spotted a tent with a particularly challenging game, shooting a basketball through a very high hoop, and won a yo-yo for making one out of three shots.

June walked at her father's side, tightly holding his hand, drawn to his cheerful outlook and to his humorous view of the people around them.

They passed the Ferris wheel and other rides and side shows and stopped at the end of the Midway to admire the new Octopus.

The blinking lights on the convoluted structure captured June's curiosity. Normally a timid child, she was filled with momentary bravado and begged her father to let her ride.

Strapped into the Octopus was thrilling and terrible. The rapid spinning of the seating compartment, coupled with the long metal arms moving up and down brought on an overwhelming nausea. When she exited the ride following the grueling two-minute ordeal, June stumbled and swerved and vomited over the side of the guard rail fence.

Carl was furious and began to yell at his young daughter, while bystanders stared sympathetically at the scene. Finally embarrassed at his own outburst, Carl gathered Clara and Bob and white-as-a-ghost June and drove them quickly home, not saying a word.

Dropping his wife and children at the house, he sped away. He never mentioned the fair or the Octopus again, but June blamed herself for her father's angry tirade, for ruining the family outing, and for the rift widening between her parents.

## **Forbidden Playground** *Goodland, Kansas – September 1939*

Winning in the fields on Caldwell was made all the more important with Clara's refusal to let Bob participate in activities at school. Even the playground was forbidden.

The doctor said no sports, no stairs, no stress. He wrote a note and Clara made sure the principal kept it in his file.

Yet Bob walked his little sister to school and back. There was no other way to get there, other than to cover the mile and a half on foot.

By the time June started first grade, Bob was in sixth. He watched over her at recess and protected her at noon. He earned mostly A's and she did the same.

But good grades didn't lift up Bob and June in the eyes of the other children, who snubbed them for their poverty and shunned them for stories of their father, rumors of his gambling and drinking and keeping company with wild women.

Nothing could be done to squelch the gossip, other than to excel. Bob came up with a plan to play sports and begged his mother to play summer league baseball. Trying to negotiate a compromise, he suggested a substitute runner should he get on base. She wouldn't hear of it.

There had to be a way.



*June and Bob ready for the first and sixth grade in Goodland, Kansas*

## **Saint Vitus' Dance**

### ***Goodland, Kansas – October 1939***

Meanwhile, Bob would aspire to be the best dressed student at school. Every day he wore a tie. No one could say he was poor, not with a tie, a starched shirt, and a neat haircut.

Like his father, his good looks served him well. The breadth and warmth of his smile lit up his home, his school, his neighborhood.

And like his father, his fiery temper could ignite quickly, usually provoked by losing, even in a silly made-up game.

Clara's endeavors to keep Bob and his weak heart quiet only made him more dogged in the quest to win at whatever he tried. It seemed his mother was holding him back and his sister was often in the way, hampering him in his chances of being on top somewhere.

Some want to win to show off or bask in the adulation of admirers, but Bob wanted to win to prove he could be somebody, even with a weak heart.

He hated it when the other kids witnessed an episode of chest pain caused by excessive exertion. Bent over, breathing hard, fading white, then retreating into the house for rest and recovery.

Certainly Bob was a stubborn child. He learned it from his parents, most especially his mother.

Clara had a long-standing stubborn streak, partly attributable to a childhood muscular disease called Saint Vitus' dance.

Before she was diagnosed and treated with medication, her father had called her a clown and pulled on her ears with each episode of tremors. It could have been worse. Even though the shakes affected her face and extremities, at least they were mild compared to some.

More problematic were the emotional effects of the disease, namely obsessive-compulsive behavior. Clara's stubborn streak was the natural outcome.

This and all served to drive Carl away from his responsibilities. And like so many, he found peace in a strong bottle of bootlegged whiskey.

Though Prohibition had ended in 1933, still Kansas did not end the ban on alcohol for quite a time.

He found himself again in the secret places that felt so comfortable to him – the hideouts in barns and basements where he found the things he loved – whiskey and women, gambling and music.

Carl was there. Clara was at work. Bob and June were at home.



*Family Photo of June, Bob, Skipper, Clara, and Carl Ihrig*

## **For Better or Worse**

### *Goodland, Kansas – November 1939*

Fifteen years had gone by since Clara had been hired at the Hotel Neu. To show some modicum of appreciation, her manager handed her an envelope with a two dollar bill and the promise of a raise.

Five cents an hour plus tips was barely enough for necessities, yet Clara was grateful, and budgeted with great care. Unending money worries intensified the strife between Clara and Carl.

As far back as Bob could remember, there had always been quarreling between his parents about one thing or another. The arguments arose in hurtful words, then shouting, then to get his way, Carl resorted to pushing and shoving and slapping. Sometimes Clara found solace under the heavy wool quilts on her bed, which blocked light and noise and blows.

Bob sided with his mother and resented his father. The animosity amid fathers and sons seemed to be perpetual, prevailing on through the generations.

If Carl came home from his nocturnal wanderings happy, he sat at the piano and played “Swanee.” If he came home mad, he sat at the piano and pounded, “Ain’t Misbehavin’.”

Free and easy were the melodies after a winning night, but dark and brooding notes and chords flowed on the mornings after nights of loss. Carl’s mood swung up and down, watered by whiskey and the stimulation of bad influences.

Clara and her parents were staunch supporters of prohibition and seeing the effects of moonshine on Carl, she was even more firmly fortified in her beliefs, and prayed for a miraculous intervention for her husband.

Carl’s progressive withdrawal from the family and escalating violence put Clara in a hopeless situation with very little support.

She couldn't help hearing the rumors about Carl at the Hotel Neu, known as Chatterbox Central. In a town of 3500, everyone knew everyone else's business. Embarrassed to be associated with Carl, Clara recognized the mistake she had made in marrying him, but according to the vows she had made on their wedding day, she would stick by him for better or worse, for richer or poorer, 'til death should part them at last.

## **Hotel Neu and Little Miss Bessie Johnson** *Goodland, Kansas – December 1939*

Clara wasn't the only woman mired in a rotten marriage. Many of the other waitresses at the Hotel Neu looked like they were in the same predicament. The older women, hardened by life and spoiled circumstances, advised Clara to get out, save herself, and save her children.

It was one thing for Clara to take blows from Carl, but to watch him mete out undeserved punishment on the children was quite another.

When June caused Bob's front tooth to chip because she shoved his trumpet into his mouth while he was practicing, her father locked her in the dark, dirty cellar for hours. Though it never happened again, the terror of that incident she never forgot.

When Bob got angry and yelled back at his father, Carl found a thick leather belt and whipped the young boy's backside, leaving welts and a fierce and retaliatory temper.

Poor Clara cringed and worried, weighing whether intercession would make matters worse.

Unrest at home and dissension at work made for a very despairing Clara.

She had been trying for years to get only day shifts, but the manager never wrote the schedule in consideration of Clara's children at home.

The winter holidays were quickly approaching and the little group of waitresses had requested so much time off that the manager decided to teach them all a lesson.

When a new, young waitress appeared, working the coveted day shifts, Clara and the others were miffed.

It was apparent why the manager had hired her. Miss Bessie Johnson was a looker, and by the way she dressed, the other women thought she might even be a hooker.

She wore her white uniform short and snug, the top three buttons undone provocatively and the hem cut higher than any other hem in Goodland, revealing her long silky nylon-covered legs. She was as cute as any Hollywood starlet, and was proud of her well-endowed, firm body. She wore a feather-decorated fedora atop her golden brown curls, and she spent a good deal of money most single women didn't have on fashionable clothes, make-up, and expensive perfume.

Clara had always held the place of youngest waitress at 34, though now Little Miss Bessie claimed to be 28, yet she didn't look a day over 23.

To old men with money or young men with unhidden passion, Miss Bessie's big brown eyes sparkled enticement; but in an instant, those same eyes could flash meanness and vengeance and greed.

She took tables out of turn, stole money from busboys and bartenders, and generally lied her way through the day. Instead of waiting on the tables in her section, she skipped over to wherever she saw a better opportunity. Instead of doing her sidework or pitching in with cleaning duties, she spent time politicking for favors or cash or services.

Everyone wondered how Little Miss Bessie could afford to live at the Hotel Neu. The maid who cleaned her room nosed in her things and discovered she was a runaway from Oklahoma; and the old night dishwasher nosed into the goings-on and discovered that Bessie Johnson was living in her room for free.

The night staff noticed frequent male visitors to the new waitress's room, where they stayed for half an hour to forty-five minutes for who-knows-what.

“Ahhh!” said one worn-out waitress. “That’s why our manager shows such favoritism to Bessie!”

Clara hadn’t trusted Bessie from the start. She heard the girl’s constant chatter to customers and when they asked where she came from, there was a different answer every time.

In the storage closet one morning, Bessie maliciously grabbed Clara’s arm, accusing her of mistrust and gossip and other manufactured faults. Clara listened wide-eyed to the barrage while Bessie divulged things only the manager should know – that Clara was being paid two-cents less than she was, and that Clara’s job was in jeopardy.

Bessie crowned the assault with a wild sucker punch: “I’ll tell you what, Little Miss Clara, your Carl is a man of great passion. He couldn’t get enough of me last night. You probably don’t even know what a great lover he is!”

Clara went from heartbreak to heat in a split second. Storming into the manager’s office, she demanded a two-cent raise; and as she leaned over the desk with clenched fists, she told him what she thought about Little Miss Bessie knowing everyone’s wage.

Siding with Clara, the other waitresses huddled together, planning their strategy for a showdown with the owner.

It was two days before Christmas, and the last thing the owner wanted was an all-staff mutiny.

Filled with righteous indignation, Clara waylaid the night dishwasher and demanded he tell it to her straight: “Have you seen my husband go into Bessie’s room?”

Lowering his head to avoid Clara’s eyes, he affirmed: “Three nights, Miz Ihrig, he’s been in there with Miz Johnson for the last three nights; and I’m so sorry to say that to you, but it’s the truth!”



*The Hotel Neu, Goodland, Kansas*

## **Deserted**

### ***Goodland, Kansas – March, 1940***

When eventually Carl came home, there was another showdown in the kitchen on Caldwell Avenue.

Carl's ultimatum to Clara was that he was going to do what he wanted to do and go where he wanted to go. She could accept it; or she could leave. Without an inch of remorse, Carl told Clara he was in love with Bessie.

He was smitten with her and she made him feel young again. At thirty-seven, he had begun to feel old and weary. With Bessie, he had renewed energy and felt hopeful for the future.

For Clara, things at home had unraveled, but at work, things were looking up. Clara got her wish with a two-cent raise from the owner, who first fired the manager, then he fired Bessie.

Furious at Clara for Bessie's being fired, Carl avoided Caldwell Avenue for weeks. Rumors floated that he and Bessie were living in an apartment together, funded mostly by Carl.

The New Year came and weeks rolled into months while Little Miss Bessie grew ever more restless. Then one March morning, Clara heard the rumor at work that Bessie had taken off for Wichita.

Relief flooded Clara's mind while she imagined Carl's homecoming and the reunion of their little family.

But it was not to be, because a day later Carl packed the car and headed east to Wichita, leaving Clara, Bob, and June deserted, the family ripped apart.



*June and Bob with Skipper*

## **Foreclosure**

### *Goodland, Kansas – July 1940*

With Clara and Carl both working, money had been tight; but with Carl gone, it became an impossible predicament.

Maintaining a household with two children on Clara's meager income proved to be beyond hope.

But Carl didn't seem to care. He sent no money and failed to keep in touch.

The stack of unpaid bills grew higher while Bob and June finished out the school year. By then, Clara would decide what to do.

The Goodland Bank held the mortgage to the little house on Caldwell Avenue. The seven-dollar-a-month payment hadn't been paid for three months. Clara worried herself sick over it, but she hadn't yet come up with a solution.

There had been no miracles. Instead, the sheriff appeared in the middle of July to notify the lonely occupants of the bank foreclosure. It would take twenty-one dollars to cure the default. It might as well have been twenty-one thousand. Vacating the property at the end of the month seemed to be the only way out.

In desperation, Clara set off for the Ihrig farm on foot, intending to learn of Carl's whereabouts in Wichita, with the slim chance of making good on the foreclosure.

For three and a half miles, Clara thought about what to say. Carl's brothers were not proud of what he had done and they readily gave Clara Carl's address in Wichita. But after Clara left, Carl's sister Esther lit into her brothers. She had never liked Clara and she wanted no part in helping her in any way.

Clara posted a letter to Carl, telling him of the situation, telling him something she knew he already knew, hoping he would care enough to help. But she knew it was too late.

She found the nearest telephone booth and called collect to her older sister Verna, who lived with her husband, Ervin Coyle, on a farm south of Culbertson, Nebraska.

Clara's younger brother, Dennis, who lived in nearby McCook, Nebraska, came with Ervin to rescue Clara and the children. They packed Ervin's truck with their meager belongings, and said good-bye to Goodland.

## **New Schools**

### ***Wichita, Kansas – September 1940***



*School photo of Bob Ihrig*

When they pulled up to the low-rent tenement where Carl and Bessie were cohabitating, Clara hopped out of the truck and rushed up the rickety stoop.

When Bessie saw Clara at the front door, she flew out the back.

Carl pleaded with Clara for a divorce, but she flatly refused, knowing if they divorced that Carl would totally shirk his parental accountability.

Bessie fled to Oklahoma City, and Carl chased after her, leaving Clara with the responsibilities of getting the Wichita household organized and enrolling Bob and June into a new school system.

June entered the second grade in an elementary school close to the house. Bob was starting the seventh grade in a new junior high, farther from home.

The students were odd and the new teachers were strangers. Even his dog Skipper was missing – left behind in Goodland with a neighbor, which made Bob and June feel even more unsettled.

The kids at the new school didn't like Bob, or maybe they just didn't like new kids. They poked fun of a small dark-haired bookish boy named David, the lone Jewish youth in the midst of these Protestant mid-westerners.

How the others treated David made Bob angry and he became David's only friend and protector.

Bob and David walked to school together every day while the other boys hurled insults and pelted them with gravel.

It was pointless to fight back, being so far out-numbered and so unevenly matched.

## **Movie Matinees on Saturday's** *Wichita, Kansas – Autumn 1940*

It was all Carl's fault – all of this – the new school, the Wichita bullies, the shack of a house, and no Skipper.

Bob's resentment of his father gained momentum, but he kept the anger in his own head and tried to be a good brother to June and a supportive son to his mother.

Clara hunted a job within walking distance of the tenement, but nothing could be found, so she concentrated on being a homemaker and attentive mother, concerned that in moving from Goodland, the children were in a new and fragile circumstance.

To his credit, every couple months, Carl stopped by and handed Clara a thick wad of cash. Knowing where the money came from, Clara guiltily accepted it, because sometimes reality takes precedence over principle.

An orderly schedule was the best way to manage the upheaval of so many transitions, and Clara saw to it that homework was completed every night, yet they designated some time to relax around the piano, which lifted each lonely spirit.

On Saturdays, Clara allowed Bob and June an afternoon outing. The mother had in mind a bit of exposure to the world within the confines of downtown Wichita and a little innocent entertainment.

By city bus, the children rode to attend the matinee. Bob was to watch over June and not let her out of his sight.

Fifty cents covered the cost of bus fare, movie tickets, and two bags of popcorn.

Nothing could compare to the glamour of the big screen. Bob was drawn to the glitz even as he stood outside the theater, facing the dazzling marquee with longing.

At the movies each week, he dreamed of becoming an actor, and he bubbled over with enthusiasm of his future plans to his sister and mother. They had no doubts it would come to pass, and they cheered him on as he boasted about being a leading actor when he grew up.

Following the excitement of the matinee, Bob was full of fire and he loved playing pranks on his little sister. After settling her on the city bus, he jumped off, pretending to leave her there alone. Of course, he jumped back on, but it left June so rattled that she finally tattled when he repeated the shenanigans for several weeks.

Clara put a stop to his ornery tricks, threatening to put an end to the movie-going if he pulled the move one more time.

Downtown Wichita was a hangout for uniformed soldiers and Bob asked his mother about them.

News reels at the theater rolled black and white footage of frightful fighting in Europe, stirred up by Nazi Germany.

The conflict was the subject of current world events in History class and Social Studies at school and the teachers kept the students up to date as things played out.

Clara tried to do what every good parent did. She tried to keep the children focused on school and homework and normal, everyday tasks.

## **Rheumatic Fever**

### *Wichita, Kansas – Summer 1941*

Despite the new school and the trouble with their father, Bob and June finished the school year with exceptional grades. And it was gratifying for their mother to see that her attentiveness had paid off.

A nearby park became the little family's summer retreat for picnics and play, though Clara watched Bob like a hawk, monitoring him for any signs of exertion. The thick canopy of leaves from ancient elms and oaks provided shade, though no relief from the oppressive heat.

Through the first Wichita summer, Bob's energy level was slowly ebbing away and by the time Clara was ready to find a new doctor, Bob broke out in a beet red burning rash, covering his chest and legs. Coupled with high fevers and night sweats, his heart condition was ramping up.

Medical care was in short supply and so was the cash needed for such a visit. Fortunately, Clara found Dr. Nix.

Unfortunately, his examination disclosed the diagnosis – scarlet fever with a complication of rheumatic fever.

Dr. Nix leveled with Clara privately that Bob's heart was already seriously damaged and he would need plentiful rest if there was any chance of survival. Rest and no exertion, no strenuous work, no heavy lifting, and no stress. Nothing a young boy should be concerned with.

Rheumatic fever was an inflammatory disease affecting not just the heart, but every joint in the body, the skin, and the brain. There could be ear and skin infections, pneumonia, kidney failure, sepsis, and heart failure. And Bob already had a heart problem.

Clara was scared to death. Rheumatic fever in someone with a pre-existing heart condition could be deadly.

Bob became so weak that he spent his entire day in bed. By the time it was time to go back to school, he was too frail to go.

The school thought he might be contagious, but he wasn't that. It was his immune system; it was as compromised as his heart.

The eighth grade would have to wait.

The fevers raged on for months and Bob hated anything touching the burning rash, not clothes, not sheets, not soft blankets.

Clara and June took turns soaking wet towels to spread on his irritated body. If the towels were too cool, he would scream in pain. If they were too warm, he would scream at whoever was nursing him.

Bob was not a patient patient. He was supposed to be going to school, playing sports, and doing whatever else young boys do, not staying in his retched burning bed.

The mother suffered more than the son. She fell into bed at night, physically exhausted, yet too worried to sleep, crying softly, murmuring prayers, yearning for some relief.

## **Books, a Radio, War and Balsa Planes**

*Wichita, Kansas – December 1941*

The semester went on without Bob, and the Thanksgiving holiday was approaching, and still he lay in his bed. A sliver of hope shone through when he asked his mother to bring him a book.

And so she did. To the library she went, bringing books – as many books as she could check out and as many books as she could carry.

Clara, the school teacher, was reservedly optimistic. Clara, the mother, was full of hope.

Bob read every book his mother brought him, and then he asked her to find his little black and white radio, the RCA he had bought with his own delivery milk money from Goodland.

The little radio found a place on the table beside Bob's bed, and he dialed the knobs until he heard some news about the Nebraska Cornhusker football team or the New York Yankees baseball team.

Then out came Bob's baseball cards, which had been packed away carefully in a shoebox. When Carl bought tins of tobacco, he saved the cards for Bob, who cherished them, especially those of Lou Gehrig, Joe DiMaggio, and Ted Williams.

Turning the dial on the RCA, Bob caught an excited announcer giving the play by play of the Kansas Jayhawks. Coach Phog Allen had lit the basketball team on fire and the University of Kansas Jayhawks were beating most everyone in their path, and most by substantial margins.

From his bed, Bob immersed himself in another world. He knew baseball and football, and basketball seemed equally challenging. He asked his mother to look for basketball books at the library, and though it seemed to her a strange request, she was heartened that he seemed to be getting better.

After school, June relieved her mother at Bob's bedside, and gathered her homework and paper dolls and kept her brother company.

After supper, Clara and June made their way to the piano, playing Bob's favorites, and singing softly, hoping the music would be a get-well serenade.

Back to Bob's room went June and the mother, eager to hear *Amos and Andy* and *Fibber McGee and Molly* on the RCA. First the music then the humor, both were antidotes for illness. Bob and June and Clara laughed until they cried.

When *Red Skelton* came on, it was time for June to go to bed. Bob made it easy for his little sister, so he told her it was a scary program, and off to bed she went.

The long illness had left young Bob more serious-minded, and he wanted to shelter his little sister from anything scary, particularly when it came to the report of an attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, December 7, 1941.

The attack was sudden, unexpected, and without provocation. There was a bustling keyed-up, over-charged atmosphere in Kansas and around the Nation. Americans rallied behind President Franklin D. Roosevelt and every detail in every life was influenced by this horrible thing called War.

Feeling powerless, Bob listened to the closing nightly radio broadcasts about the War after June and his mother were fast asleep. He understood what the news reporters meant when they said our liberty was at stake.

He dreamed about being a soldier and powerful pilot, a mighty military officer, helping save the Country from a loss of freedom. But all he could manage was building planes, light and miniature aircraft, constructed from balsa wood and glue. Flying from his bedroom ceiling, the balsa planes assured Bob of better days ahead.

## **Big Bill's Billiards and a Coal Cellar**

### *McCook, Nebraska – Summer 1942*

On warmer days, Bob worked on taking steps as far as the front stoop, where he sat on a soft-cushioned chair and took in the sun. After a few weeks, he walked to the end of the block and back and with each rewarding effort, he pushed himself to venture out a little farther.

By the end of summer, the fevers had all but subsided. Still frail and skinny as a rail, Bob at least was up and about and looking forward to getting back to school.

When he saw Dr. Nix again, the doctor beamed: "It's a miracle!" Then he proceeded to give very specific instructions about what Bob wasn't allow to do. He gave Clara a note for the principal with strict orders, one being he was not to climb any stairs. The doctor's last warning was, "Sports are obviously out of the question!"

Clara got wind of a strange and oddly fortuitous happenstance. Carl and Bessie had left Oklahoma City and were on their way to McCook, Nebraska, of all places.

Clara started packing. She called Verna and apologetically begged her sister to send her husband Ervin and brother Dennis with the truck again to move them this time to McCook.

She convinced herself and promised Verna that she wasn't running after Carl and Bessie. Clara just wanted to be close to family and thought the children would do better in a smaller community.

Nothing was keeping them in Kansas, so the few personal belongings and a couple pieces of secondhand furniture were stowed on the truck and they were gone.

Besides Dennis and Verna, Clara's older sister Alma, now married to William Hanke, also lived in McCook.

Clara didn't want financial support from her siblings, but even a favor now and then made life easier for the little one-parent family.

They found an affordable place to rent in the basement of an old house. The owner claimed it was a basement apartment, but it was no more than a coal cellar, its ceilings so low that Clara and Bob had to maneuver the rooms with their heads bowed down.

Dark and dingy, smelling of coal, it was a depressing place to live. Clara promised herself they'd find another home soon, one that would be better for Bob's health.

Rent and groceries, doctor bills, school supplies and clothes – there were so many essentials it seemed impossible.

Within easy walking distance, the mother found work as a waitress at Big Bill's Billiards on West B Street.

The rough old patrons at Big Bill's smoked too much and drank too much and played too much pool. They smelled of grime and sweat and smoke and beer, but they tipped well as long as no one minded a pat on the butt or a sassy comment or two.

When Clara left Big Bill's she felt cheap and dirty, but her apron was full of money and somehow she'd have to deal with this trial for just a while longer.

It was her fault she was in this mess, but it was Carl's fault too. She was going to make things better and she'd do it, too. All by herself.

## **The “Y” and Junior High** *McCook, Nebraska – Fall 1942*

Having missed an entire year of school, Bob started eighth grade at McCook Junior High.

A new school and new teachers meant more adjustments, but the students seemed to be a gentler lot – no bullies, and yet many of the kids avoided Bob. He looked sickly and so frail that a gentle breeze could blow him over, and they didn't want to catch whatever he had.

He balanced himself by holding onto the walls, and the other children smiled politely and gave him wide passage, not knowing what to do with the pale stranger among them.

That fall, Bob got sick again and when the new doctor saw him, he reviewed his history and recommended a tonsillectomy.

Dr. Boulware was right: the surgery proved to be a good idea; because immediately after, Bob began to improve. He gained weight and took on some color; and with that, the other students ventured toward him and initiated conversations about spring sports.

Could Bob run track or play spring football? Could he play summer baseball? Eager questions brought the usual hesitant responses from Bob.

He desperately wanted to play but he knew what the answers were: “no” from his mother; “no” from the doctor. And the truth was, sports were out of the question.

Bob was caught between the avoidance of sports and constantly repeating why he couldn't participate. With restrictions imposed by the doctor and carried out dutifully by his mother, his resentments multiplied.

Sensing Bob's dejection and growing isolation, Clara bought him a year's membership at the McCook YMCA. She met with Director Glen Gillaspie and explained her son's health problems and the resultant challenges he faced at school.

The director took charge of Bob, and recognized his abilities above and beyond the physical ailments that held him back. Bob helped Mr. Gillaspie with administrative duties and took over some refereeing work. He became the junior coach of the younger boys and spent more and more of his time at the Y.

Mr. Gillaspie was just what Bob needed – a father, a friend, a coach.



*McCook's YMCA and Bob making a chess move in the game room.*

## **West Third Street** *McCook, Nebraska – Spring 1943*

Ping pong, cards, and chess – these may not have been sports, but Bob played them at the Y and mastered them with the utmost competition.

Every time he won, it boosted his self-esteem; and every time he lost, it intensified his desire to win.

He swam in the heated indoor pool every day and every day he grew a bit stronger, a bit sturdier, a bit sharper.

That spring Clara's sister, Alma Hanke, found a two bedroom house for rent at 209 West Third. It was next door to the Hanke's home and Clara jumped at the chance to be her sister's neighbor.

Clara had been saving Big Bill's tip money and with the satisfaction born of managing her own money, Clara presented the deposit to the landlord, along with the first month's rent.

The little house was just three blocks from the YMCA so the mother knew if Bob was not at school or home, then he was surely at the Y.

Director Gillaspie bragged to his business neighbor Ray Search about Bob; and consequently, the manager of the Fox Theater and Temple Opera House offered Bob a job as usher. The two entertainment venues were near the Y, making it easy for Bob to get to where he needed to go.

Clara looked around downtown and found an opening as retail clerk at Montgomery Wards. The pay was not as good as Big Bill's, but it was a respectable position, and the hours were better suited for family life.

Clara had an aptitude for math and when the manager discovered it, he moved her upstairs to bookkeeping. Inspired by the promotion, Clara enrolled in an accounting correspondence course and advanced in responsibilities and salary.

Ultimately, Clara granted Carl his wish and consented to a divorce, so long as he agreed to financial support for the children.

When it was all settled and the divorce was final, Carl came and spent a day with Bob and June, and at the end of the day, he said goodbye.



*Bob and June with their father, Carl Ihrig, outside their new home at 209 West Third in McCook*

He and Bessie were heading for Wyoming to be married in front of a Justice of the Peace. And just as quickly, they moved to New York City, where Carl took a job with United Airlines at LaGuardia Airport. He worked as an airplane mechanic, and drew a substantial salary.

Things were looking up for Carl, until he lost his new young wife. It was, after all, New York City, and off she went without Carl on an adventure of her own.

He never found Miss Bessie. Sometimes a person just doesn't want to be found.

## **The Trimmers**

### *McCook, Nebraska – Summer 1943*

Izella Trimmer was a large woman who lived in a large white two-story house across the street from the little white house at 209 West Third with her husband Joe and two children Francis "Franny" and Wanda.

Izella knocked on the door of the little white house, her arms full of baked goods – two loaves of fresh homemade bread, a cinnamony apple pie, and two dozen fancy hand-decorated sugar cookies. She handed the whole lot to Clara while she stepped across the threshold, all the while chattering about herself and her family and throwing in questions about Clara and Bob and June, though she seemed to know all the answers to all the questions she had just barely asked.

Old Joe Trimmer was too occupied for calling on new neighbors. He was either at the farm or the filling station or the family grocery store. Owning three businesses didn't leave much time for socializing, so he left that for his wife; and besides; he had no patience for it.

Some years past, Joe and Izella had moved off the farm into town and bought the antique Victorian house with its wide inviting porch, a spacious country kitchen, and two flights of stairs.

Wanda Trimmer was a high schooler and was too occupied with homework and friends and things other than neighbors.

Franny Trimmer was a big, burly youngster and just a year older than Bob. None of the kids at school messed with Franny because he was known to push his weight around; but unpredictably, he and Bob became best friends. The two gathered with Bob's first cousin, Bud Hanke, from the end of the block, and they swapped baseball cards and sat on the street sidewalk for hours with marbles and jacks and yo-yos.

Sometimes the threesome was allowed to go fishing and hunting, but not without Clara's strict admonishments about Bob's enforced limitations.

When June was diagnosed with polio, the news came as no surprise. The doctor told Clara that June's case wasn't as bad as others; but still and all, it was another blow to the little family.

June's therapy for body and soul was to go to Mrs. Trimmer's house after school. Izella Trimmer's philosophy of life was simple: "Be happy, do good, and love your neighbors."

So she passed it along to June, and taught her to cook and bake, and sew and crochet. To strengthen her polio-inflicted legs, June climbed up and down the steep stairs, and when she went home later, she took with her a sunny mood and a few sugary treats.

As for Clara, she at last had found a friend for herself in Mrs. Trimmer, and a delegate grandmother for Bob and June. And with family close by, she had the backing she had always needed.

## **Band, Cookies and Baseball**

### *McCook, Nebraska – Autumn 1943*

The promised money from Carl never came. No letters came either.

On occasion, Carl's three Goodland brothers stopped by on their way to visit a sister in Minden, Nebraska. Irwin, Arthur, and Oscar must have been trying yet to make up for Carl's

wayward ways, because they brought money for Clara and the children, sealed in an envelope, and delivered with embarrassed apologies about their errant brother.

With the money and her employee discount at Montgomery Wards, Clara bought clothes for herself and the children, making sure they looked clean and neat and presentable, and not nearly so poor.

Then Mitzi appeared from somewhere and completed the family circle. She was a black, short-haired mutt-mutt and highly ambitious. Mitzi helped make the Ihrigs look like a normal family even though they certainly weren't.

To be in the school band was the popular thing to do, so as a freshman, Bob joined the marching band. Clara had agreed, but they couldn't afford to buy an instrument; and therefore, Bob would have to borrow one from the school.

When he came home with the last remaining musical instrument, Clara nearly fainted.

"You can't play that thing!" she cried out. "You don't have the wind to blow on a tuba, and you shouldn't be lugging it around!"

With Bob standing erectly in front of her, he demonstrated the correct position of the enormous horn. To Clara, the mammoth thing resembled a boa constrictor, squeezing the life-blood out of her unfortunate son.

Bob told his mother he'd be mostly sitting down, but Clara knew that tuba players stood to play, even in concert band.

Clara gave up arguing about the tuba and Bob kept up with it – all the way through high school.

The first Christmas in the little white house, Mrs. Trimmer brought two shoeboxes filled with hand-decorated Christmas sugar cookies. The cookies were works of art – a gift from Mrs. Trimmer's heart and the beginning of a sweet holiday tradition that continued for years to come.

The absent Carl shipped gifts to his children – a bike for Bob and a fancy New York coat for June. But Bob had almost outgrown wanting to ride a bike; it was as though his father didn't know him anymore. And still, no money came and never a letter.

When Director Gillaspie set out to organize summer YMCA baseball, he recruited Bob, sensing he was stronger than when they first met.

Mr. Gillaspie sent the paperwork home with Bob, requiring a parental signature to play baseball. The director assumed Clara would give permission for her son to play, and Bob assured him she would, but Bob knew she would never give consent for him to participate in any kind of sports, so he forged her signature, and safely stowed the paper in a secret place until he returned it to the Y.

Bob didn't mean to lie. It wasn't that he would be doing something bad. Sports were good and playing would help him get stronger. Of this, he was certain.

So he went to play baseball that summer. He yearned to tell his mother and sister – how well he was doing, that he was one of the best hitters; and moreover, that he was McCook's star pitcher.

But Clara and June never knew.



*Clara Ihrig in a new outfit, Bob with the tuba in his band uniform, and Bob in his baseball outfit*

## **McCook High School**

### *McCook, Nebraska – Autumn 1944*

It was on the tip of his tongue so many times. He wanted so badly to brag about summer baseball. Bob was old enough to make some of his own decisions and he knew baseball was good therapy. His mother was just being overprotective.

They would never see eye to eye on this.

Summer was over much too soon and Bob was back to playing tuba and that was it. No participation in any sports – doctor’s orders, mother’s rule.

He felt like a fifth wheel, an out-of-place tagalong as he walked to school with Franny and Bud. Franny was the center on the football team and Bud was a standout in several sports.

Bob decided to become a standout in fashion. He’d be the best-dressed boy in high school and with the money he made working, he bought sports coats and ties and shoes from the finest clothing stores in McCook.



*Bob Ihrig's sophomore school photo*

Hobnobbing with local merchants and other businessmen was effortless for the enthusiastic young man and soon Bob was asked by Mr. Gillaspie to see what he could do about reviving the Hi-Y Club, a YMCA after-school all-boys club.

With help from Franny Trimmer and Bud Hanke, the club was reborn. It was exclusively private and the members met in an upstairs room at the Y.

In the rented space, the boys listened to music, played chess and pool, ten-point pitch, ping-pong, and poker. The Hi-Y held co-ed dances in the gymnasium at the YMCA on Saturdays and took in admission proceeds for additional activities for the club.

Organization, competition, and socialization – every talent Bob possessed he put to use.

The Hi-Y Club revival was a success, and Bob served as the state secretary for Hi-Y Clubs across Nebraska.

For the next two years, with Bob at the helm, the club flourished. But at school, he still didn't fit in.

## **Personal Pilgrimage** *Goodland, Kansas – Summer 1946*

Without telling a soul, Bob hitchhiked to Goodland, Kansas, in the summer of 1946. He went in search of independence and answers, seeking to piece together the threads of an early childhood that he could barely recall.

The Ihrig Uncles Irwin, Arthur, and Oscar were working in the fields and Bob's Aunt Esther would not round up her brothers for a visit from their nephew.

For whatever reason, Esther didn't like Clara and her iciness to Clara's son was readily apparent. Bob was old enough to be a fairly good judge of character and human interactions, and the meaning was clear. He and his family were not welcome and shouldn't bother coming back to Kansas.

Esther's brothers may not have shared her sentiments, but they weren't given a chance to speak up, and the damage was already done.

Bob hitchhiked home and while he stood beside the road waiting for a ride, angry thoughts mushroomed against his father and father's family.

The depression he felt transferred to his feelings about school and his unhappiness multiplied.

Franny and Bud had already graduated and were off to college.



*Franny Trimmer and Bob Ihrig*

Another close friend was off to college, too. Beth Nutzman, a cheerful and studious mentor, had sometimes helped Bob with his homework. Clara had taken a shine to her and called her “Honey-Girl” when she came to the house to tutor Bob, but now she was gone and Bob was a senior, left without any true friends in McCook.

Being a senior should have been exciting, but he felt isolated and off-balance and without a future plan.

## **State Football Champions** *McCook High School Bison – Autumn 1946*

With Bud and Beth and Franny gone, Bob was left at school with other kids who hadn’t made any connections to him. They didn’t notice that he was the YMCA State Champion in ping pong or that he took second place in the open chess competition in Lincoln.

The Chamber of Commerce recognized Bob for his service to downtown McCook and named him “Outstanding Boy Citizen.”

But the kids at school didn’t know he was an outstanding citizen, or maybe they just didn’t care. On the other hand, Bob hadn’t reached out to them either.

Athletes had top billing in high school and since Bob had been forbidden to partake in sports, he was left out. All he could do was observe students and parents and townspeople heap adulation on the Bison football players.

The star receiving all the glory was the “Big Moose,” Leo McKillip, who ran, passed, and punted the Bison to one victory after another.

With each win, the team gained more confidence and as the boys strutted down the hallways at school, they drew a crowd of admirers, especially the pretty and popular girls.

McCook beat one highly ranked squad after another. The biggest contest of the year came against the number one rated Grand Island Islanders with their outstanding running back, Bobby Reynolds. The Bison crushed the Islanders by a lopsided score of 40 to 7.

Most of their opponents didn’t even gain one point against the McCook boys which resulted in a top spot in the *Omaha World Herald* polls.

At season’s end, the Bison were undefeated and declared Nebraska State High School Football Champions. The mayor of McCook announced a celebratory parade down Norris Avenue as the whole city applauded the team and its heroic effort.

Bob didn’t share in the euphoria of that season. He was jealous – jealous of Leo McKillip, jealous of the other football players, and jealous of not playing any significant part in the whole winning scene.

Instead, he sat on the sidelines, blasting out low notes on a heavy brass tuba, knowing he could have played football. He could have helped the team. He could have been the star.

## **United States Army** *Omaha, Nebraska – December 1946*

Bob’s high marks at school, his successful work downtown, even his love of dressing sharply – nothing satisfied him anymore.

The Bison's triumphant season ushered in another layer of hopelessness for Bob. Aggravation with his mother for holding him back physically topped the list of things that were wrong.

Rankled and ready for something better, Bob decided to join the Army. He was more than ready to chart his own course.

Finished with people pitying him, he was convinced he wouldn't be pitied in the Army. He would leave McCook halfway through his senior year, and be off to a new life.

He could take a couple correspondence courses and graduate from high school by mail. To Bob, it was a done deal.

Enough of an unhappy existence described in the number one song sung by Dinah Shore – “Laughing on the Outside (Crying on the Inside).”

Bob had been following the progress of World War II and rejoiced in the defeat of the German, Japanese, and Italian forces. Following the war and the horrific battles fought in Europe, the United States still needed men to serve in the military.

From the very day that President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the G.I. Bill of Rights on June 22, 1944, affording those who had served the country a generous package of financial aid to attend college, Bob had planned on enlisting. Knowing his mother would never have the wherewithal to pay for college, the G.I. Bill was his ticket to a brighter future.

So when he broke the news to his mother that he was joining the Army at semester's end, she laughed at him. “Go ahead, but once they look at your medical records, you'll never be accepted.”

Clara's flippancy made Bob more determined than ever to be on his own. The next day, he marched up three flights of stairs to the recruiter's office at the post office and signed up for the United States Army.

The day after the semester ended, Bob boarded the Burlington Zephyr bound for Omaha. His first train ride was the beginning of a fresh and thrilling venture.

In Omaha, Bob passed a speedy and questionable medical exam, delivered by a doctor who had been ordered to fail only those young men with obvious and debilitating conditions.

That evening, Bob joined other recruits in celebration. The next morning, he and the others stood in a line at attention, raised their right hands, and pledged the military oath:

*"I, Robert Carl Ihrig, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God."*

Bob was a full-fledged American soldier. He would surely need God's help and a little bit of luck.

## **In the Asian Pacific** ***Occupied Japan – January 1947***

Clara faded to ash white when Bob opened the front door wearing olive green. How was it possible that the Army had accepted her fragile child?

The mother drilled the son as to why he had passed the medical exam, but no answers were given. Bob himself hadn't questioned the process. Why should he, when the outcome ruled in his favor?

The rest of December, Bob stayed in McCook, boxing up treasures to store in his closet, seeing friends who came home for Christmas vacation, and packing his canvas duffel for the journey West.

After a Happy New Year, Bob boarded the California Zephyr for San Francisco, and disembarked at Camp Stoneman.

When boot camp was behind him, he flew for the first time to Japan with the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry under the command of General Douglas MacArthur.

American troops occupied Japan after the war in an effort to control any further uprisings. It was a time of unrest for Japan, but the United States' policy was meant to help rebuild a demoralized country which had been utterly and physically destroyed.

Advancing rapidly, Bob became a Technician 5<sup>th</sup> Grade (Corporal), and he received the Asiatic Pacific Service Medal.



*Bob in Occupied Japan*

Despite the devastation around him, Bob loved Japan and his work in the Army.

In long letters home, he described a beautiful country in ruin, its population suffering from the scarcity of food and yet putting on an air of hospitality to the servicemen among them. The Japanese petitioned the GIs for cigarettes and chocolate, nylon stockings and Army jackets, for coins and rations – everything and anything the soldiers owned.

Prostitutes, young and old, wandered through the broken streets, along with artists and musicians who were willing to trade services for mere pocket change.

On a free time excursion one day, one of the starving artists stopped Bob and pleaded with him to allow him to paint his portrait on silk. Loaning Tanimoto, the young Japanese artist, his Army photo, Bob arranged a meeting the next day.

The rendering was perfect, the artistic skill was flawless, the price was far too small. Bob paid Tanimoto, grinned his thanks, and bowed deeply.

To keep his painting safe, he shipped it home to Nebraska.

Bob imagined his mother then, opening the package eagerly and smiling when she saw the object of all her sleepless nights. Quiet tears she would shed, with fear for her son so far away, and in a lonely foreign place.



*Corporal Bob Ihrig's Army photo and the silk painting by Tanimoto*

## **Brooke Army Hospital** *Fort Sam Houston, Texas – April 1947*

As was inevitable, Nature's cruelty came calling in Japan.

Early in April, Bob began to experience a now-familiar burning sensation in the legs, followed by an infectious crimson rash covering his entire body.

It seemed he was growing weaker every day, yet he pushed ahead and tried to do his work.

But when he became too weak to get up from his cot, the medics were summoned.

Every joint was so inflamed that it made signing hospital admission papers nearly impossible.

The post Army physicians diagnosed a severe case of rheumatic fever, and gave the order for Bob to be shipped out immediately.

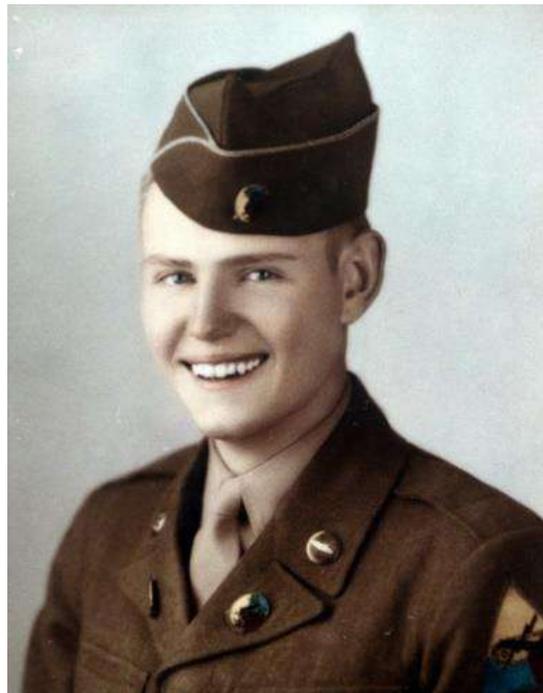
The hospital ship heading stateside sailed slowly to the shores of California. When Bob arrived at Brooks Army Hospital, the Fort Sam Houston doctors notified Clara in McCook. They felt uneasy about his survival, but hoped for the best.

Bob had gone down this road before and though somewhat worried, he assumed after a few months of rest, he'd be up again to carry on.

His goal was finishing high school, so he signed up for the necessary courses through the Pittsburgh Evening High School.

When the veteran high school diploma came in the mail, he wrote to the principal of McCook High School. Back home, the school board and principal quickly signed a diploma for Bob and sent it to Texas, along with a copy of the 1947 McCook High School yearbook.

Instead of the traditional senior picture, Bob's official Army photograph appeared among the rest of his classmates.



*Robert Carl Ihrig's Senior Class Photo*

As Bob lounged on his cot at Brooks Hospital, he carefully leafed through the white leather volume. Photos of the school and teachers and students he had seen every day made him thoughtful and a bit nostalgic about home.

When he came to the end of the book he hesitated, and stared at the pages where seventy-five seniors, those he thought didn't even know him, had signed their names and penned messages of hope and health and thanks for his service.

## **Discharged and Back Home** *McCook, Nebraska – October 1947*

Just months ago, Bob had been determined to get as far away as possible from school and home. And though he wouldn't trade serving in Japan for anything, time away from McCook had changed his mind.

One thing was certain – he hated the confinement of a hospital. He hated being told to rest. He hated having this sick, weak heart.

It wasn't until October 1947 that Bob was released from Brooks Army Hospital. Sadly, he was also released from the United States Army. In his hand, he carried the certificate printed with "Honorable Discharge under Medical Conditions."

The Army medical staff declared Robert Carl Ihrig 100% disabled, with explicit instructions that this classification meant he was completely unable to work at any job for any reason.

He boarded the Greyhound heading north with reliance on the driver for help with his duffel bag since he was too frail to stow it himself. At over six foot and less than a hundred pounds, he barely could maneuver the bus steps despite using a cane.

Bob had intended to serve four years in the Army and return home as an honored hero. Instead, he hobbled unhappily off the bus toward his mother and sister, who would nurse him devotedly at home once again.

He was crushed. He was embarrassed and he was ashamed.

Too late, the Army admitted their mistake in enlisting a man with a history of heart problems and rheumatic fever.



*Bob after his discharge visiting his Aunt Verna Coyle on their farm south of Culbertson*

Commendably, the Veterans Administration took responsibility for Bob and did so for the rest of his life.

He spent another several months confined to his bed, cooped up in the little home on West Third Street. Thankfully, medical care was covered by the VA and disability checks came every month.

With plenty of time to think about his future, by the time Bob was strong enough to leave the house in April 1948, he had it all figured out.

What good was the GI Bill for college if he couldn't work? Why would he go to college and not use his education? It made no sense.

He walked around the block, then around two blocks, and then three. Then he walked to the YMCA and made arrangements with Mr. Gillaspie to swim in the heated indoor pool.

Then he went to see Mr. Ray Search at the theaters.

Disability be damned.

## **1946 Crosley Crosmobile** *McCook, Nebraska – Summer 1948*

Bob got his job back at the Fox and Temple Opera House.

Walking to work was fine, but he needed a car to go where he needed to go.

The 1946 Crosley Crosmobile was a means of transportation and a status symbol for Bob and his big schemes.



*Bob inside his new 1946 Crosley Crosmobile*

Someone in the family finally owned a car, thought fifteen-year-old June. If Bob taught her how to drive she could get her learner's permit, and then her driver's license.

But the brother's self-absorption stood in the way of reciprocation for all the sister's nursing care through bouts of heart-related illness. Bob used the excuse that his car needed to last him a long time; and while that was true, he could have shown a bit more consideration to the little sister who worshipped him so much.

But he was busy working and socializing, and had no time for his little sister, as he made up for the lost time he had spent in bed.

That was 1948, the summer he had enrolled at McCook Junior College. The summer he met Dora Mae Chitwood at the Old Settler's Picnic. The summer he held hope and dreams and new beginnings above all else.

## **McCook Junior College** *McCook, Nebraska – September 1948*

Bob had signed up for college using his GI Bill. Being an actor still held a fascination for him, but he was quickly being pulled in the direction of coaching and spoke to the counselor about it.

“If you never played sports, why do you think you can coach?” argued the counselor. “You could teach, but you need to give up this crazy idea of being a coach!”

Bob declared his major to be education, and added other classes to his curriculum – journalism, radio, debate, and drama. Career possibilities were endless and his interests expanded.

He joined clubs and organizations and an acting troupe. He acted in school plays and won a dramatic award. He ran for student council twice and served two terms. He became the assistant editor of the school newspaper and co-editor of the yearbook.

He rushed from one project to the next and put his whole heart into the coursework.

The role of student manager of the McCook College Indian football team went to Bob. He became the coach's shadow, standing next to him during practice and games, learning the game, the rules, the strategies, and what motivated the players in the best way. As manager, he lettered twice and belonged to the Indian Letterman's Club.

Compared to high school, college was a whole different ball game. Students showed a measure of maturity and staff treated students like adults.

Being in college was as golden as being in the Army.



*Bob's Student Manager photo at McCook Junior College and his yearbook photo*

## **A Date with a Girl named Maisy** *McCook, Nebraska – November 1948*

Clandestine meetings in the Crosley on a dark street in Indianola occurred with frequency and after stories of family sagas, Dora Mae felt that maybe she had a chance with Bob, the fragile, yet strong man, still a boy, who had laid himself out before her.

For now, though, she had tenth grade to worry about and he had college.

Work and school and extra-curricular activities loaded Bob's schedule, so he continued resorting to the late-night meetings with Dora Mae.

At Thanksgiving break, he asked Dora Mae on a real date – a motion picture at a real theater.

Bob had carefully chosen the movie he wanted Dora Mae to see. The light-hearted comedic series starring Ann Sothern as Maisie Ravier was just the ticket. Ms. Sothern had been cast in over fifty Hollywood films, with the Maisie movies being the most popular. The character was brash, spunky, and flirtatious, a perfect part for the loveable Brooklyn showgirl.

With Bob's free-movie-pass at the Fox, he had seen every one of the Maisie shows and *Undercover Maisie* was the tenth and final showing.

Dora Mae's movie-going experience was limited, making the evening an especially special first date.

On the way back to Indianola the two chattered about the film, and by the time they reached the old lady's home where Dora Mae was staying, Bob had dubbed her "Maisy."

## **Dining and Dancing** *Southwest Nebraska – March 1949*

The parents knew nothing about their children's budding romance. The Chitwoods were on the farm, isolated from any goings-on. Clara went to work, back home, and to church, unaware of anything going on with Bob and an out-of-town girl. And besides, she had warned her son that girls were a distraction from college. Clara just assumed her son would follow her advice, but the warning went unheeded.

The attraction between Bob and Maisy was stoving up; the temperature had gone from warm to hot.

Whenever Bob had a free evening, he and Maisy had dinner, followed by a movie or dancing. The first time they went to a restaurant, Maisy felt like it was the height of indulgence. The Olympia Café or the Rocket Inn soon became her favorites, though truly the food was secondary to the one sitting across from her.

Bob took his girl shopping – for clothes and shoes and make-up. He wanted her looking the way he imagined. He wanted her moving the way he imagined. He wanted her talking the way he imagined.

Sometimes they danced the night away at the McCook City Auditorium or The Gateway, an exclusive nightclub where they gained entrance with Bob's military I.D.

Dancing was a dress-up affair, and it fed Bob's appetite to show off and be seen. He taught Maisy the dance steps he had already mastered and they copied new steps from other couples. Foxtrot, jitterbug, rumba – they practiced and perfected, while Bob sought the limelight on the dance floor center.

## **Temple Opera House Fire** *McCook, Nebraska – May 20, 1949*

The previous winter, in December 1948, the boiler in the basement of the Temple Opera House had blown up. The fire had reached the third level where the firewall was about to give way before the fire department had contained the blaze. Flames had destroyed the theater floor, most of the auditorium seats, and had caused damage in the adjacent Masonic Temple and two other buildings.

Luckily, the fire hadn't reached the projection booth, where acetate film was stored. Had that happened, a major explosion would likely have occurred, and downtown McCook would have been perilously struck.

The fire called for a change. The worn-out Victorian burlesque theater was about to be transformed into a flashy, art deco, neon-filled movie house. It would be renamed The Bison Theater.

Mr. Search assigned Bob a few renovation duties such as cleaning up debris and being a gofer for the carpenter crews who were arriving on the scene.

It was the end of an era. Gone were the elegance and charm of the Temple Opera House. Nellie Snee and the other crew would adjust as people always do.

There was not much time, though, for being nostalgic about the old place. Bob had college to attend to and he had managed to end the first year in the top ten percent of his class.

He was pleased and his mother was elated.

## **Unexpected Expectancy**

*McCook, Nebraska – May 25, 1949*

The next time Bob and Maisy had dinner, he noticed she seemed quiet and a bit pre-occupied.

When he asked about her mood, she put down her fork, looked at Bob intently and blurted it out: “I’m pregnant! I’m pretty sure of it!”

Staring at Maisy and not saying a word or even breathing, Bob entertained a brief, irrational thought. Like so many other young men faced with the same news, he wondered how this could have happened. Stupidity – he had been stupid and assuming.

The very next minute, he pictured the coming confrontation with his mother. Telling her he had gotten a girl pregnant filled him with a profound dread.

And dreadful it was. Breaking the news to Clara was as bad as he had imagined.

After the verbal attack on her son, the mother began an attack on the girl. Clara questioned Maisy’s morals, her upbringing, and her motives. She questioned the girl’s age, whether or not Bob knew the family, and if her son had considered a solution for the mess he was in.

Bob had already made up his mind and when he told Clara they would be married, she closed her eyes and shuddered.

## **Meeting the Family**

*Somewhere Along the Republican River – May 27, 1949*

Bob knew of a pretty spot along the north shore of the Republican River and he planned a family picnic to introduce Maisy to his mother.

Clara brought along her sister Verna and her husband Ervin Coyle. She needed the emotional support of her family and Bob was satisfied that Maisy could meet more of his people.

But it was a strained and awkward supper, full of polite questions and judgmental platitudes.

Maisy hardly said a word and when she did, her speech sounded disrespectful and backward, not at all like studious Beth who Clara had called “Honey-Girl.”

The picnic ended flatly, with no mutual admiration shown by one group to the other.



*Clara, Ervin and Verna Coyle with Bob and Maisy at their picnic next to the Republican River*

There were so many things Clara wanted to say to Bob, but if she lectured him as she wanted to, she’d no doubt drive her son completely away.

Clara found Maisy to be uneducated, lacking polish. If she dropped out of school to have a baby, then she’d miss out on the schooling she should have.

To Clara, Maisy wore too much make-up and Bob had too little good sense. Maisy seemed twenty, even though she was sixteen; and Bob seemed sixteen, even though he was twenty.

Clara was already upset that Bob had given up his monthly disability checks, and she couldn’t resist chastising him again for it.

There were other options for this baby. Why didn’t they just give the child up for adoption?

If Bob married this girl, it would be all wrong, just as it had been all wrong for Clara to marry Carl.

Clara knew Bob was doing the honorable thing – marrying the girl who he had made pregnant. Yet by Clara’s verdict, she suspected that the baby might not even be his.

Regardless, the mother would not uphold the son’s mistake, so she would boycott the whole affair. “If you get married to that girl, I won’t be there. You can do better, Bob. You can do so much better!”

## **Meeting the Other Family** *Indianola, Nebraska – May 29, 1949*

When June and Maisy met, Maisy sighed in relief. The two girls didn’t have much in common, but they were the same age and June seemed simple and sweet; and after the sour picnic, perhaps Maisy had found a quiet ally.



*June Ihrig and Dora Mae (Maisy) Chitwood*

It was Bob’s turn now to meet the Chitwoods and as he maneuvered the Crosley around the ruts in the county road south of Indianola, he made a snide comment about Maisy’s family’s choice of where they lived.

Maisy looked out the dusty car window and saw for the first time how utterly desolate this must look to a city boy.

When at last the Crosley turned into the farm yard amidst a cloud of dust, four-year-old Jimmy ran outside to greet his absent sister.

Fourteen-year-old Jesse, a toothpick hanging from his mouth, sauntered from the side yard to see what all the commotion was about.

Jesse led the way to the house, past the sagging barn and up the steps and across the rickety porch.

Bob could hardly remember the farms in Goodland, but this place seemed especially poor. He supposed that long ago the house had been a showcase. It was mainly brick, but some of the brick was crumbling, the roof was bare in spots, and the trim around the windows was splintered and lacking paint.



*Jimmy at the Chitwood Farm*

From the front door, the aroma of supper cooking pulled Bob and Maisy into the kitchen where Maisy introduced her mother. Her father appeared in the doorway with a pipe in his hand and a look of relaxation on his face, having just finished the evening chores.

“Dad, this is Bob. We’re going to get married. Soon!”

Faye turned from the cookstove then and stared at her daughter without smiling. Maisy followed her mother’s eyes move slowly to her waistline and back to the young girl’s eyes. With no reaction to the news, Faye instructed her to lay two more plates at the table and pull up two more chairs.

Verl clasped Bob’s right hand in a firm shake and welcomed him into the family.

They were all crowded around the table, but left a broken chair at the end. The wooden floors were uneven and a few walls were cracked, yet Faye kept the house spotlessly clean and it seemed like the Chitwoods had all they needed, even without indoor plumbing and electricity. At least they weren't complaining.

Bob was ravenously hungry and he couldn't remember smelling anything so good. Politely he sat motionless while Faye and Maisy brought in a heaping bowl of mashed potatoes and steaming golden biscuits.

Bob copied Jesse's action, heaping potatoes and open biscuits onto his plate. Creamy butter topped the food before Faye spooned the mixture of gravy and hamburger from a heavy skillet over the bread and potatoes.

Maisy watched Bob as he swallowed the first bite. The look of pure satisfaction was clearly evident. "What is this, Mrs. Chitwood? It's utterly delicious."

Faye rose from the table to spoon more of the concoction on Verl and Bob's plates, and before Faye could answer, Jesse shouted, "It's called 'shit on a shingle!'"

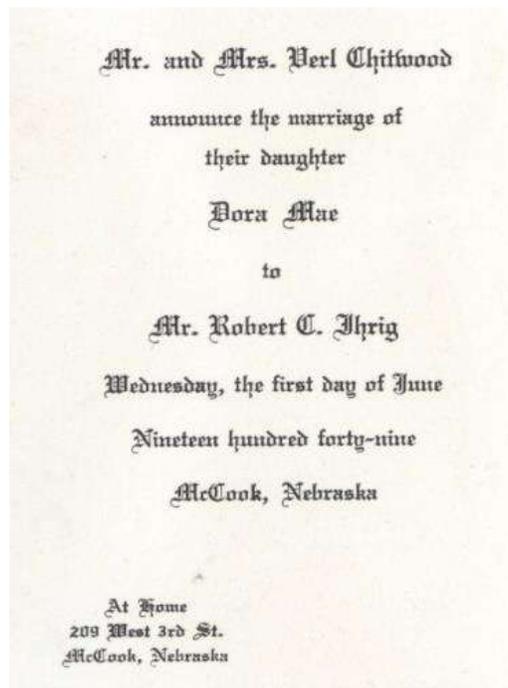


*Around the Chitwood dining table*

## **Shower for the Bride** *Indianola, Nebraska – May 31, 1949*

This was a lot for one mother to take in. Meeting the new son-in-law. Her daughter not finishing high school. The lost effort of getting Dora Mae into town for an education. The utter and complete regret of her daughter being pregnant before she was married.

Still, Faye Chitwood wanted a proper wedding, and she arranged for an announcement to be printed in the *Indianola News* and *McCook Daily Gazette*.



*Faye Chitwood's wedding announcement in the two newspapers*

There was barely enough time for a bridal shower, but Faye wanted to do things right. She would host the shower – right there at the farm. Inviting friends and family and Clara and June would make for a substantial gathering to shower the young bride-to-be with what she needed to set up a happy home.

The party conflicted with Clara's work, so June was left to represent the groom's family.

While the females partook in their pre-marriage ritual inside the house, Bob helped the Chitwood men with the evening chores.

By the time the party was over, Verl knew about Japan and college and Bob's plan for the couple's future. It sounded like a perfect life for his only daughter and it seemed that Dora Mae had done really well for herself.

"Dora Mae" – the name June kept hearing all evening. When she asked Bob about it on the way back to McCook, he snapped at his sister: "She's Dora Mae to them, but to us, she's Maisy! I want you to call her Maisy!"

## **Private Wednesday Wedding** *McCook, Nebraska – June 1, 1949*

Clara was livid.

The nerve of her son's mother-in-law-to-be! Printing 209 West Third as the site for the wedding! No one had asked Clara about it!

After his mother's fit, Bob had no inclination to get married at home. If his mother was so very outraged, he'd make other arrangements.

The Congregational Church where his mother and sister attended was just two blocks up the street, and Pastor Horn agreed to perform the ceremony there.

On the first day of June, Bob dressed in his new suit, bought flowers for his bride, and went to get Maisy on the farm. She was wearing her new suit also, one that Bob had picked out and paid for.

After a session at Larson Photography Studio, they pulled up directly in front of the little white frame church. No other cars were parked out front. It was just Pastor Horn, the bride and groom-to-be, and their witnesses.

Sister June and Franny Trimmer walked up the street to the church and stood erectly next to Bob and Maisy.

It was a solemn, yet happy occasion. The only things missing were the parents.



*Wedding Photo of Robert Carl Ihrig and Dora Mae Chitwood*

## **Honeymoon for Three** *Culbertson, Nebraska – June 1, 1949*

The ceremony lasted less than a half hour, and Bob and Maisy were off to the Chitwoods in Indianola to announce that they were married.

Faye stood stoically in the shadows while Verl grinned in congratulations and clapped Bob on the back.

With nothing to give to the couple for a wedding gift, the only thing Verl could think of was one of the newly-weaned puppies in the barn. Jesse ran to fetch one, and came back with a long-haired wiggly mutt.

Dora Mae christened her Taffy and off they went, headed for a honeymoon in Culbertson.

Eleven miles west of McCook, Dennis Schnell, Bob's uncle, had built the Silver Leaf Motel, and it was there where the newlyweds spent their first night as man and wife, cuddled together with a tiny whining puppy.



*Honeymoon at The Silver Leaf Motel in Culbertson, Nebraska*

## **Grand Opening of the Bison** *McCook, Nebraska – January 1, 1950*

Bob and Maisy toured the streets of McCook, looking for their first apartment. The Andrew Sisters' number one song played on the radio, harmonizing with the couple's thoughts for the future; "I Can Dream, Can't I?"

The second year at McCook College was busier than the first. Bob saw no reason for cutting down his hectic schedule even though he was married. School and classes, clubs and activities, and work at the theaters filled his days and nights, while Maisy sought to quickly learn the role of homemaker and wife.

Ray Search was pushing hard to get the new Bison Theater open by the holiday season. Bob was making a hefty dollar and hour wage, working the door, smiling away the hours.

When the glitzy Bison Theater opened its doors in the new year, it gave the patrons a glimpse of the beginning decade.

And for Bob, he was looking straight ahead with anticipation for an epic new start.



*The new Bison Theater, McCook, Nebraska*

## **Pamela Sue** *McCook, Nebraska – February 1, 1950*

At St. Catherine's Hospital just a month into the new decade, Maisy gave birth to a healthy baby girl named Pamela Sue.

A baby changes everything and from the beginning, “Pammy Sue” began to repair the rift between Bob and Clara and even to some extent between Maisy and Clara.

Maybe Clara realized that the little family wouldn’t be in McCook for long, and knowing that, she wanted to see the baby as much as she could.

She took a first step in considering that her new daughter-in-law had some qualities she hadn’t wanted to recognize before, like being skilled in the kitchen, despite the girl’s young age.

Maybe with Maisy cooking for Bob, he’d gain some weight.

Maybe everything would be all right after all. At any rate, it was easy to put Pammy Sue directly in the middle, squarely in the center, and naturally on top.

## **Half-way There**

***McCook Junior College, McCook, Nebraska – May 26, 1950***

A two-year degree was only half-way to where Bob wanted to be, but there was a graduation ceremony and a diploma, and a family sitting together to watch him cross the stage. His mother, his wife, his daughter – there to give him the backing he so craved.

Now on to the next.



*Clara, Pammy Sue, Bob and Maisy*

## **Kearney State Teachers College**

### ***Kearney, Nebraska – June 1950***

McCook was home. Not his birthplace, but school, family, and work had made it Bob's home.

It was time to leave McCook again, yet they wouldn't go too far.

Bob had applied to Teachers College for the summer session and off the young family went, bound for Kearney, just 103 miles north and east of home.

They qualified for military housing so they knew where to go – directly to 110 Vet Village, Unit C.

Maisy set up the apartment while Bob rushed off to register for classes.

He met with the counselor and listened to the advice he had heard before – “You can't be a coach! Think of your medical condition. You can be any kind of teacher you want to be and what's more, you can go into school administration.”

It was all very tiring – listening to what he couldn't or shouldn't do.

This much was certain: Bob would get a bachelor's degree in education and a teaching certificate.

Kearney State Teachers College was the next step and it was just a matter of time. He would do the course work and graduate. Then he would apply for a coaching job.

## **Referee Robert**

### ***Kearney, Nebraska – Fall 1950***

Plotting out the courses, Bob chose a summer class on Referring and Officiating. Taught by the coaching staff, it was an intense overload of rules and regulations for football and basketball.

By summer's end, he completed the class, passed the state exam, received his certification, and became a member of the Nebraska High School Association of Officials.

Bob worked in the area and was paid well as a referee, with the goal of officiating a fair game while at the same time being a part of the athletic atmosphere.

On the court or on the field, Bob ran around the boys and kept the pace, never letting on about the pounding in his chest, or the squeezing of his heart muscle. With the whistle around his neck and his hands on his knees in a position of intense concentration, he watched the action and slowed his breathing until he took off again.

At the conclusion of every contest, Bob rested on a bench or a bleacher and opened a notebook. He wrote out every brilliant strategy and every devastating coaching mistake. One notebook was filled and another one begun until he had a library of references to develop into future playbooks.

Onward with purpose; forward with hope.

## **Maisy's Isolation** *Kearney, Nebraska – Summer 1951*

Officiating one or two games a week wasn't enough to support a family, even with military housing and the G.I. Bill. A flexible part-time opportunity came by way of selling life insurance.

Most young men would cringe at any sales job, but with a wardrobe of jackets and ties, a car, and a winning smile, sales success was sure to follow.

Bob took a position with Lincoln Liberty Life and it filled in the gaps for all the little necessities of life. The work would prove beneficial in the summers to come.

Maisy's job was to care for the baby, clean the apartment, do the laundry, press Bob's clothes, and have supper ready on time.

She had Bob's little radio playing softly in the background, tuned to a country-western station, with Hank Williams singing "Why Don't You Love Me Like You Used to Do."

Bob paid no attention to the music during the supper meal. He conversed about classes and work and studying and a hundred other things apart from home, his wife, and the baby. Maisy listened to him with a measure of interest, but nothing seemed personal to her and she knew no one in Kearney except for her husband and her child.

When the family went out, they mingled among other college students who Bob quickly made friends with, though Maisy felt inferior and uneducated and would rather have stayed home.

It was just easier to be isolated at the apartment barracks while Bob hobnobbed with his fraternity brothers, doing what young college men do.



*Maisy swinging Pammy Sue in back of the military housing*

## **Robert Mark**

### ***McCook, Nebraska – August 19, 1951***

Umpiring baseball, life insurance sales, and summer school filled Bob's days and nights.

Child care and housekeeping blurred one day into the next for young Maisy who felt Nebraska's August heat like never before.

By then, Maisy was very pregnant and soon to deliver a second child, and it came about on a weekend trip to McCook to visit Bob's family.

Late Saturday night, Bob took Maisy to St. Catherine's Hospital while Clara stayed home with Pammy Sue.

Early Sunday morning, a baby boy was born. Maisy was exhausted. Bob was exhilarated. He drove to the nearest liquor store to load up on cigars.

A son, Robert Mark, would be the epitome of everything Robert Carl couldn't be – an athlete, a star, a hero.

## **Christmas Visit**

### *McCook, Nebraska – December 1951*

Carl, the absent father, travelled from New York to Nebraska to meet his new grandchildren.

In an effort at cordiality, Clara hoped to make the Christmas reunion a pleasant affair.

Carl entertained the family with stories of working for United Airlines at LaGuardia, the excitement of the big City, and his new venture driving a limousine for a few well-known celebrities. Carl's habit of telling tall tales dampened the impact of any impression he was trying to make.



*Carl Ihrig with Pamela Sue Ihrig and Clara Ihrig with Pamela Sue Ihrig at 209 West Third in McCook*

But an absent father home again didn't mean that all was forgiven and that Carl would be there for birthdays and other holidays. He had no intention of leaving New York City and being with the family he had left so many years before.

It turned out to be an awkward and bittersweet meeting. Clara wished he hadn't come at all. Bob didn't care if his father was there or not. June longed that things were different.

**Mid-Term Graduation**  
*Kearney State Teachers College*  
*Kearney, Nebraska – January 18, 1952*



COLLEGE GRADUATES. Left to right (back row) are: Donald Nelson, Duane Matison, Warren Burdick, Verle Zemanian, Robert Ihrig, and Allen Chen; (front row) Judith Peichert, Darius Fulton, Mary Peterson, Phyllis Gray, and Alberta Ring Byrum. Not pictured are Ted Jamson, William Hassmeyer, and John Bartholomew. —(Hub Photo).

**Fourteen KSTC Seniors Receive Degrees at Mid-Term; Plans for Future Cover Many Fields**

*Newspaper clipping featuring Robert Ihrig with the other mid-term graduates from KSTC*

School ended with a thud.

A graduation at mid-term meant no ceremony, no celebration, no congratulations. It felt like a letdown.

Bob had earned a bachelor's degree and a teaching certificate, but not a job. He hoped officiating assignments and selling life insurance would support a family of four.

By the time a couple of months had gone by, he had begun to question whether or not he should have stayed on disability. He didn't need all this worry.

He talked to his professors and they assured him he would get hired, probably in May, closer to spring graduations.

But not being hired was torturous and patience was not his strong suit.

## **Last Man Picked!**

### ***Kearney, Nebraska – August 1952***

May graduations came and went and Bob's friends left for teaching assignments all across the state and beyond.

His resumé was stellar, with high marks and experience as a referee, but the entry with the medical discharge from the Army kept a possible new job prospect at bay.

It was hard to have come this far and not be hired, and the most difficult part was keeping a positive outlook.

Then it came.

A desperate plea from a tiny school in need of a teacher and a coach. They had just released their coach two days before the start of classes.

The school called Kearney State.

Kearney State called Bob.

He was in.

## **Village of Venango**

### ***Venango, Nebraska – Late August 1952***

Venango sent Dick Dudden with a bulky grain truck to haul the Ihrigs a hundred and seventy-five miles to their new home.

The high school freshman seemed perfectly capable of maneuvering the truck over the curb. He backed up to the door and hoisted the furniture and boxes in until the apartment was completely empty, and the truck was completely full.

Dick pulled ahead and Bob followed in the Crosley, with the children and dog in the back seat and Maisy riding shotgun. Zigzagging west, they covered the distance, wondering where this young man was leading them.

When they approached the gravel road in Perkins County, Bob broke out in song, his voice rising in volume over the sound of the tiny tires fighting the rough surface.

*When you wish upon a star  
Makes no difference who you are  
Anything your heart desires  
Will come to you*

*If your heart is in your dream  
No request is too extreme  
When you wish upon a star  
As dreamers do*

After a tiring sixty miles of unpaved road, they approached a cropping of trees and the essential grain elevators. There was a town out here after all, and the official marker read “Venango 233.”

The main street supported the businesses – a grocery store, a local bank, the post office, a drugstore with a modern soda fountain, the necessary saloon, and Rose’s Café.

There were two clubs for veterans and three churches for Protestants; and besides the school, that’s all these folks had required since its beginning in 1867 – the same year Nebraska became a state.

They pulled up to a framed bungalow with a white picket fence. The school district owned the house and it would be home to them for as long as Bob was coach.

“Coach” had been flowing out of Dick Dudden’s mouth since he had pulled up in Kearney and it seemed like the most natural title in the world for Bob, but when Dick addressed Maisy as “Mrs. Ihrig,” she cringed, and preferred he wouldn’t talk to her at all.

Unloading the truck, Dick chattered to Coach about his family’s ownership of the grain elevators they had passed along the railroad tracks. The Duddens were one of the largest employers in the area and Dick’s grandfather recognized the importance of keeping the school strong and viable, which was why he sent the truck and his grandson to fetch the new coach.

As for Bob, he was about to embark upon the inside workings of a small school and community. There was a lot to take in within the space of two short days, but Bob was determined to learn about the people of Venango and make an impact here.

Meanwhile, he needed to find the box with his jackets and shoes and shirts, and help Maisy unpack the kitchen.

## **Venango High School**

*Venango, Nebraska – August 25, 1952*



*Dear old Venango High,  
We all love you,  
We will all stand by the Gold and Blue,  
We forever are back of you.  
Through the thick and thin  
If we lose or win,  
We will all be true to the end.  
Dear old Venango High  
We all love you.*

The school stood three stories high at the south end of town. To Bob, there seemed to be far too few a crew for a structure so large. Three teachers taught the elementary students in grades one to six. Four teachers taught junior and senior high in grades seven to twelve. That included the principal and superintendent who pulled double duty as teachers. Then there was a janitor, a maintenance man, and three cooks. Twelve persons in all made up the entire staff and they worked long and hard to serve the community.

The meager staff was testament to the meager salaries, and Bob had signed a contract to draw a \$1900 salary per year, including free rent and free lunch. But he hadn't gone into

education to get rich, so he was satisfied with what the district offered, and hoped he would soon gain a raise.

PE (physical education) for boys, Science, Health, and History were Bob's assignments for junior and senior high. Besides classes, he would coach football, varsity and junior varsity basketball, spring track, and summer baseball. The summer coaching was not on the school district docket, but it was an expectation all the same. The Venango Legion Baseball Club was a big deal; and subsequently, a trained coach was put in charge.

Forty-seven students made up the junior and high school census. Nearly all were farm kids, half from Nebraska, and half from nearby Colorado, and all rode the bus.

Getting an education was a weighty matter out here, but so were chores and family time and church, and specially sports.

Girls' sports were not part of the curriculum in Venango. The girls were relegated to pep club and cheerleading, all in support of the boys. And this they did with intensity. All the more so when they got their first glance at the new coach.

Bob arrived at school in a sports jacket and tie, linen pants, and Italian leather shoes. It was his customary attire, but in Venango, it was extraordinary.

Given the situation, it was safe to say that by the end of the first day, half the girls had a crush on Coach.

## **Six-Man Football** *Venango, Nebraska – September 1952*

Six-man football was developed in 1934 by Stephen Epler of Chester, Nebraska. Smaller high schools needed a game with fewer participants and the six-man team was the answer for some programs.

Coach Ihrig knew the rules for eleven-man, eight-man, and six-man football and he had umpired in those contests, but he had never played football and he had never coached it, so this would be a new challenge.

Back in 1934, when six-man had evolved, there had been an exhibition game to introduce the game to coaches from Kansas and Nebraska and over the following decade and a half, the six-man game had taken hold, and spread across the country.

This would be the first year for six-man football in Venango. The playing field was smaller than eight- or eleven-man football, and the Venango school district had built a new baseball diamond just two years before, in 1950, complete with bleachers and lights on poles for night games. The field could easily be adapted for the new football program.

The equipment and uniforms had already been ordered. The schedule had been set.

Coach Ihrig had his work laid out before him. Six games, a new game, a new season, a new coach.

## **Royal Turner - QB** *Venango, Nebraska – September 1952*

Most of the players were used to rigorous farm work, so football practice seemed to them to be more of the same.

Coach Ihrig was hard on the young men, but he was also fair, so he let any boy try out for any position. Naturally, everyone wanted to be the star; and diplomatically, Coach allowed them a chance to show if they had what it took.

That first year, Royal Turner, a sophomore, won the place for the coveted position of quarterback. He had the ability to pass and run and move around quickly under pressure. But mainly he stayed calm and made intelligent decisions, which was key in the quarterback position.

Thankfully, there was no time for Royal to stew about the first game. He was chosen as quarterback, and it was time to play.

## **Venango Panthers vs. Mullen Broncos** *Mullen, Nebraska – Friday, September 12, 1952*

Coach Ihrig arrived at school dressed in his usual sports jacket, shirt, and tie, color-coordinated to match the Panthers' team colors. Maisy had spent hours pressing, steaming, and starching her husband's inaugural attire.

Bob wanted everything to come off perfectly and even a narrow win was good enough the first time. He was heaping a mound of pressure on himself in all the detailed preparations.

He had commissioned the school cooks to make a special lunch for the team; and once the boys had consumed it, the group from Venango headed north.

The opposition was in Mullen, 165 miles away in the Sandhill region of Nebraska, which made for a challenging trip on a Friday afternoon.

In the lead, Coach rode in the front passenger seat with the father of a team player who knew the best way to get there, together with three big farm football boys. Other cars followed, and in the last vehicle, the pep club and cheerleader sponsor, Miss Ruth Stoll, crept at the rear with a load of chattering girls.

Bob and Miss Stoll were the sole staff members surrounded by eager high schoolers and easygoing parent chaperones. They'd need to push it to get there by kickoff at seven.

Somewhere along the way, the lead driver took a wrong turn, and didn't realize it until they were hopelessly lost.

A stock hand from a nearby feed lot came to the rescue and gave them directions to Mullen – a shortcut which took them on a country road that was not much more than a cattle path.

Proceeding eastward, they motored slowly over the trail; but when a downpour hit, they slipped and slid and grinded gears and came to a complete stop.

The passengers emptied the vehicles and pushed and grunted and cursed. When one car muscled in back of Miss Stoll's new Studebaker, she moved forward, but not without a huge dent in the pristine trunk.

Bob vowed to pay for the damage while the muddied company piled back into the cars.

There were no dressing rooms in Mullen so the boys had already dressed in their new white road uniforms, trimmed in blue and gold. Now they were covered in smelly muck, as were the chattering girls, their fresh outfits ruined for the initial game.

By the time they arrived in Mullen, it was nearly ten o'clock. The Mullen coach was steaming mad, yet determined to play the game, even if it took all night.

The Venango team was hungry, muddy, exhausted, and peeved. The Broncos showed no pity, but midway into the third quarter, they called the game using the "Mercy Rule," established in six-man football, for occasions such as this.

The disastrous final score: Mullen 54 – Venango 0.

## **The Agony of Defeat** *Venango, Nebraska – September 1952*

Sulking and silent, Coach Ihrig sat beside the front driver, making the 165 miles home seem like a somber drawn-out funeral procession.

Saturday morning at five, the weary travelers pulled into the school parking lot, where worried parents had waited for hours. They quickly dispersed and left for chores on the farms.

Humiliation and embarrassment had kept Coach quiet on the ride to Venango, but the minute Bob closed the front door at home, he erupted into an angry tirade lashed by disappointment and a sense of failure.

Maisy knew that trying to soothe her husband would be pointless, so she took the children outside and kept out of his way, hoping he would eventually calm down before he did damage to his heart.

After what seemed like hours of reliving the agonizing defeat, he fell asleep with the last fitful memory in his mind of the opposing coach's gloating.

Sunday afternoon he awoke in confusion, wondering what day it was and what time had passed. When he spotted the heap of muddy clothes on the floor, memory and agony flooded back from so great a loss. Bitterness crowded out any positive thoughts and he spent the rest of the day alone in his room.

## **Pep Talk** *Venango, Nebraska – September 1952*

Losing was unacceptable. It would not be part of Coach Ihrig's modus operandi.

Sunday evening he had worried whether the team would even come to practice on Monday.

Monday morning he worried about what to say to the team if they did come.

Coach was unused to making team speeches, but he went with an honest approach and thanked the team for showing up to practice, for playing the game on Friday, and for demonstrating good sportsmanship despite everything stacked against them.

He took responsibility for letting someone else chose the bad road to Mullen and the catastrophe it caused. He praised the boys for not being quitters, for their bravery against bad odds, and for sticking together.

Seldom had losing a game served a team so well, but the practice that day was focused and full of spirit. There would be five remaining games and they set about to meet their opponents in the best physical shape possible.

Two weeks later Venango played their second game – another away game – with a better outcome. The Panthers lost 33 to 39, yet the players saw the close score as a reason for optimism.

On the third road game, the Panthers were victorious and celebrated as if they had just won a championship. The game ball went to Coach Ihrig, presented by a prideful team and quarterback Royal Turner.

## **June and Bud** *Venango, Nebraska – October 1952*



*June and Bud Warner*

Bob could hardly wait to call his brother-in-law after the team’s first win. Not to brag – just to announce the good news.

His sister June had married a Navy man the previous summer, and Leland “Bud” Warner and Bob had hit it off from the day they met.

His mother Clara hadn’t approved of the union, giving reasons that a Navy man would surely have a woman in every port. Clara didn’t trust June’s choice and didn’t like his tattoos, but June made her own decision and that she surely had done.

Bud and Bob admired one another, and had even been born in the same month of the same year. Bud had been a sports star in Moorefield, Nebraska, and was impressed that his

wife's brother was a coach. Bob commended Bud for making such a good living, working as a salesman for a regional bakery.

The Warner's lived in North Platte, not too distant from Venango, so they promised to attend the Panthers' first home game. An invitation to make it a family reunion was extended to Clara, but she rejected the offer.

The mother would not support Bob's coaching in any way. She disagreed with his choice of career because of his heart condition and she would not be party to what she considered reckless behavior.

So the plan was made, and Bob and Maisy and Pammy Sue and Bobby Mark could hardly wait, June and Bud were coming soon.

## **Homecoming** *Venango, Nebraska – October 24, 1952*

A visit from Sister June and her husband Bud, the first home game at Venango, and Homecoming: it was all wrapped into one dramatic weekend.

Venango alumni arrived in town. Football field lights had been installed. And a new tradition for concessions had been initiated by the Legion Club. They sold candy and pop, popcorn and hot dogs, gum, coffee and hot chocolate. All the profits went to the school and the whole thing added to the festive atmosphere.

Townsfolk lined their cars around the field perimeter with their headlights on adding illumination to the contest in front of them and extra seating for those who opted to take their refreshments privately.

June and Bud sat in the bleachers with Maisy and the children, and watched as the team trotted onto the field. Pammy Sue watched the young cheerleaders and pep club perform their routines and jumped up and down in front of her seat.



*Front Row Cheerleaders: Yvonne Schroeder, Cora Maye Murray, Marilyn Berges  
Second Row: Darlene McAdams, Charlene Senstock, Ardyth Weers, Arlene McAdams, Miss Ruth Stoll, Sponsor  
Third Row: Gertrude Erdman, Nancy Hiatt, Jo Ann Wieland, Leone Davis, Beverly McAdams*

Bud and June watched Coach Ihrig on the sidelines, where he ran up and down, shouting instructions to players, challenges to referees, and mutterings to himself during the entire game. He praised the team when they did well and threw his hat on the ground in disgust when they did not.

There was no holding back when a referee made a bad call and Coach pointed out the ref's lack of knowledge in the rules of six-man football.

Bud knew the rules and was caught up in the strategy and action. June remembered childhood days in Goodland with Bob directing all the neighborhood boys in the field on Caldwell. He was the same now as he was then, doing what he loved.

It was a hard-fought victory for the Venango Panthers that evening when Royal Turner threw a long touchdown pass before the end of the game.

At the closing buzzer, cheers rose from the bleachers. Cars and trucks honked and flashed their lights, and Coach fell to the grass on his knees, exhausted yet jubilant – a win, a victory, the most wonderful feeling of all!

## **Jealous Celebration**

### ***Venango, Nebraska – October 1952***

There was standing room only in Rose's Café after the game.

When Bob opened the old front door, he was greeted with well-wishes and back-claps as he made his way to the table his family had saved for him.

Coach Ihrig was the center of attention and he loved it. Maisy found it hard to ignore the flirtations of high school girls toward her husband. She was jealous, pure and simple. Jealous of thin pretty girls, looking fresh and carefree in their uniforms, and only a couple years younger than she. With two children and extra weight from carrying them, she felt unattractive and old.

Maisy's gaze drifted across the street to the town's only saloon. She would probably have a better time over there, she thought to herself. But she focused again on those in front of her and the role she had chosen as Bob's support.

Bob and Bud left Maisy and June with the children at home while they drove to Boulder the next morning. They wanted to see the Nebraska Cornhuskers play the Colorado Buffaloes and they made the decision that the women and children would not come. Being left behind was becoming commonplace for Maisy and it didn't please her, not one bit.

## **Family News**

### *Venango, Nebraska – November 1952*

The Panthers won their final two football games. Considering the boys had never played the game before, the season had been a success.

Bob wished there could have been a rematch of the Mullen game under circumstances of mutual fairness, but that would not happen, so the record stood at four wins and two losses and it was a commendable standing for the year.

News from the family was scarce so when a call came from the Chitwoods, it was a surprise. Verl wanted to know what Bob and Dora Mae thought about buying the land he was leasing. His landlord had decided to sell the farm of nine hundred acres of dryland and he had offered it first to Verl and Faye.

Thirty thousand dollars was the asking price and though it seemed to be a fair valuation, Verl was afraid of borrowing money and didn't trust banks, not since his own father had lost his homestead from a bank foreclosure.

The young couple had no knowledge of land prices or bank loans and they stayed silent on the matter, only to give their congratulations when in a few weeks, Verl announced they had purchased a tiny fifty acre farm on the northeast edge of Indianola. Besides the land, there were out-buildings and a small stone block house, all for five thousand dollars cash.

The Chitwoods were contently settled, but Dora Mae and Bob barely gave it a thought, such were the duties and activities of the autumn in Venango.

Then out of the blue came a call from Clara announcing her marriage to one Ronald Miller, an Army airman who had been stationed at the airbase north of McCook. Ron sold Clara on moving to the State of Washington, far from her siblings and children, but close to his own family and friends.

Bob's lonely mother had the right to be happy, but the news didn't set well with the distrusting son.



*Ronald and Clara Miller in Washington*

## **Venango Basketball**

### *Venango, Nebraska – November 1952*

Stowing the football equipment in an out-of-the way school closet, Bob switched his thoughts and energy to basketball, his favorite sport by far. Like the locals, his expectations ran high, fueled by a rich basketball heritage in the little Nebraska town.

In years past, the Venango Panthers had advanced to the State Tournament eight times, yet without ending on top.

This could be the year!

Coach ordered new uniforms and fancy pants and warm-up jackets in shiny gold. Looking good was part of the winning strategy.

Basketball practice started with running exercises and drills to improve an up-tempo style of offense with fast breaks and bounce passes, rebounded from an opponent's missed shot. Training for defense involved man-to-man coverage to keep the game moving quickly as opposed to some defenses using a slower stationary zone approach, but the season ended with only seven wins and six losses, yet an overall attitude of optimism pervaded the team and school.

The year's statistics recorded sophomore guard Royal Turner turning in an average of 22 points a game and junior center Bud Senstock brought in an average of 18 points. Only one senior filled the starting lineup and the junior varsity team ended the year with 13 wins and three losses. No one could deny the future seemed bright.



*Front Row Starting Five: Marvin Bates, Jimmy Wieland, Bud Senstock, Doug Watkins, Royal Turner  
Second Row: Coach Bob Ihrig, Jerome Naugle, Raymond Berges, Dale Ourada, Jerry Stephens, Dick Dudden*

## **The Playoffs**

### ***Venango, Nebraska – January 1953***

District Playoffs gave supposedly mediocre teams a chance to play basketball in January after the regular season; and more importantly, the playoffs gave the Venango Panthers an opportunity to advance to the Regionals.

The offense began to click and the losses in the regular season kept the team humble and careful and they blew through four games on top to win Districts.

With the District Championship came an invitation to Regionals. If they could just win two more games, they would advance to the State Basketball Championship.

The first game was a close one and at the last second, Royal Turner hit the final winning basket from long range.

The Regional final ended in a loss for Venango, but the team had gained confidence and something to build on for next year.

There always seems to be a hero, and that season it was Royal Turner, who played more like a senior than a young sophomore, pushing his playoff average to 35 points a game.

With their performance beyond the regular season, the team was rewarded with a trip to the State Basketball Tournament in Lincoln. The school board voted to send the team and pep club along with Coach Ihrig to the state competition in hopes of gathering additional inspiration in the year to come.

## **Legion Baseball**

### ***Venango, Nebraska – May 1953***

For Coach Ihrig though, the year to come never came.

Bob had made a decision to leave Venango, and head East, near Omaha where he accepted a teaching and coaching job closer to the University, where he could earn a master's degree and work toward getting bigger salaries at bigger schools.

Venango had been a passable first year and if he would stay, the teams would be even better; but personal considerations won out and besides that, the pay at Venango was substandard, considering the coaching time involved.

So the little family began to pack their belongings, while Bob went on to finish his contract, a few more months coaching the summer Legion baseball team.

Singling out a special boy, Coach Ihrig focused on developing the talents of one Raymond Berges. This young man lived on a Colorado farm, not far from Venango.

The student population had always been made up of half Nebraskans and half Coloradans and they worked in harmony with one another, except for their loyalties to their respective college football teams. But this was Legion baseball and Venango was common ground, and sports and youth development were the common goal.

Raymond suffered from the aftereffects of rheumatic fever and football and basketball were games not suited for his physical abilities. So Coach taught him to play shortstop and helped him in becoming a switch hitter.

Raymond became the star that summer and Coach Ihrig certified his own calling.

## **Busted Move**

### *Venango, Nebraska – August 1953*

Days before their move East, Bob received a letter renegeing on his upcoming job offer.

What now? What happened? Where would he go? Could he stay in Venango?

Lack of funds to operate the school budget was cited as the reason. The school was consolidating – joining with another school in eastern Nebraska, combining resources,

strengthening the school population, and the new combined school already had a coach and Bob was out.

How he wished that he could renege on his resignation!

He had turned it in at the first of the summer. Once the boys of the community heard what had happened, they approached the Venango school board and begged for Coach Ihrig to be retained but a contract had already been signed with a new coach and Bob was out.

Calling Kearney State Teachers College again, Bob pleaded for a new position – anyplace.

The Venango house would soon be the home of a different family. The Ihrigs' moving boxes were filled, the tiny car was loaded, and they piled in, ready for another adventure, not knowing where, not knowing what, not knowing when.

## **Principal Mayfield** *Alvo, Nebraska – August 1953*

Some say everything happens for a reason. Some say everything is predestined. Some say everything is nothing more than luck.

Undoubtedly, luck stumbled into Bob's way.

From Venango to Indianola, the Ihrigs motored East. At the Chitwood farm, they stopped and stayed for the night.

Father-in-law Verl held a message from Kearney State Teachers College which he had safeguarded for his son-in-law.

“Call Principal Mayfield in Alvo, Nebraska,” the message read. “Now!”

Bob had asked the College to communicate with the Chitwoods, in anticipation that he wouldn't be reachable while traveling.

Principal Mayfield painted an idyllic picture of Alvo where his replacement would become teacher, coach, and principal. More responsibilities, but less income.

Mr. Mayfield had taken a similar post at Ralston, Nebraska, a larger school south of Omaha and he was desperate to find his successor. Bob was at the other end of an equally desperate situation and was relieved to be saved from selling insurance or refereeing which might have been the outcome had he not been saved by Principal Mayfield.

“Tomorrow!” Bob told Maisy. “They want me in Alvo tomorrow!”

## **Alvo High School** *Alvo, Nebraska – August 1953*



*Alvo Grade School, Junior High, and High School*

*The little town is named Alvo,  
And for it we all shout “bravo”,  
A general store, many others too,  
Life in a small town is for you,  
The park by the depot is quite the thing,  
And there we all can have our fling,  
Nebraska’s first consolidated schools,  
Don’t that prove that we’re no fools?  
Our little town is really “swell”,  
Life here rings clear as a bell,  
Thanks go to some railroad tracks,  
That’s the plain unvarnished facts.  
In 1890 these tracks went through  
Shacks along it were made by its crew,  
Modern homes have appeared today.  
But the old exciting past will in memory play  
Doris Nobbe, 1947*

If Venango was small, Alvo was even smaller. Dirt road streets crisscrossed the tiny hamlet that boasted a thriving John Deere dealership, the most notable business in town. Downtown was one block long, or rather short, and there were fewer than two hundred residents in the census.

The school house stood three stories, higher than any other structure save the towering grain elevators which lined the essential train tracks north of the business district.

Kindergarten to twelfth grade gathered in the brick building built in 1917, the lifeblood of the community and the hope of its citizens.

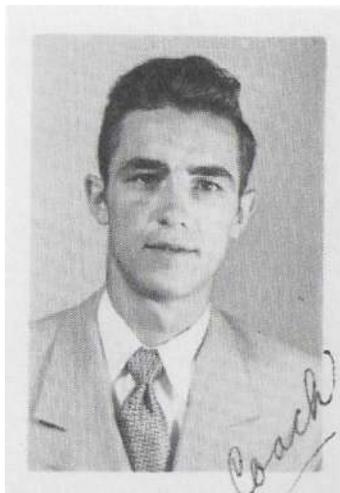
Bob entered the principal's office to find Mr. Mayfield packing his personal effects into a box on the massive oak desk in the center of the room.

After just an hour, Bob knew the detailed plans for the upcoming year for academics and sports. Things that were needed and the things that were lacking.

Bob found himself wishing he could spend more time with this congenial man, a new friend, the unassuming and accommodating principal and coach – Ollie Mayfield.

## **Replacing Coach Ollie Mayfield**

*Alvo, Nebraska – August 1953*



*Coach Ollie Mayfield*

By early afternoon, Bob was out on Main Street, visiting businesses and introducing himself as the new principal and coach. Not one of the merchants knew of Mayfield's departure and not one was glad about it.

By late afternoon, the whole of Alvo had learned that Coach Mayfield had left them for Ralston.

By early evening, the community collectively blamed the newcomer for Ollie's decision to leave.

One of the business women blasted Bob, telling him he wouldn't be accepted even if he did win and according to her, "Ollie was like a 'god' to our town."

Oliver "Ollie" Mayfield landed in Alvo right after graduating from Peru State where he received his teaching certificate in 1950. He was like family to the residents, having been born and raised nearby on a farm in Cedar Creek in Eastern Nebraska.

Ollie resurrected the football program, building it up to win the Cass County Conference three consecutive years. For three years the Alvo Orioles were top-ten ranked by newspapers covering six-man football. Coach Mayfield's record was an astonishing 23 wins and 4 losses.

It wasn't much different in basketball. In his second year at Alvo, Ollie's team won districts and in the third year, they advanced all the way to the semifinals of the State Basketball Tournament.

In Ollie's last year at Alvo, the town erected a new gymnasium and the Lincoln Journal and Star honored him as Coach of the Year.

Apparently, Bob, the interloper, had just walked into an impossible situation.

## **Alvo Orioles Football**

*Alvo, Nebraska – September 1953*



*Front Row: Coach Bob Ihrig, Jim Morgaridge, Bud Herrmann, Arlan Neben, Dick Clark, Noble Fisher, Mike Heier Student Manager  
Back Row: Mickey Lipskey, Lee Fischer, Jim Hermance, Bob Garcia*

Jealousy toward Ollie Mayfield never entered Bob's mind. Instead, he wished that someday he would find a place where the town loved him as much as Alvo loved Ollie.

From the start, Coach Ihrig knew Alvo wouldn't be that place. Bob's coaching style and winning strategies didn't line up at all with Ollie's calmly, methodical manner. Patiently, Coach Mayfield had told his young players more than once: "Whether you think you can, or think you can't, you're right."

Coach Ihrig was incredibly intense. Everything he directed was intense – from running laps to practicing plays. Coach drilled the boys and gave his commands as if his life depended on it.

The boys didn't like it. Though eleven of the fourteen boys in high school showed up for the first practice, it didn't necessarily mean they were going to care for the new coach. They just needed to be in sports. It's what the boys did.

There were five returning starters on the six-man football team and all were seniors. For three years they had run the ball. Their plays had been designed to charge down the field. It's what the coaches taught.

But not Coach Ihrig. The passing plays he drew up matched his own abilities, because there he was, out on the field in sweat pants, performing for the players, enacting what he expected of them.

The previous year's uniforms were suitable and could hardly be improved on. The bold, wide black and orange stripes exhibited the team's ability. Bob was satisfied with them and pleased he wouldn't have to go through any difficulties getting new ones.

As always, he made sure he had a new set of clothes, arranged to match the school colors and render confidence.

The season opener began against a longtime rival, the Yankees from Union, Nebraska, another small town in Cass County with a six-man football squad.

Under the new rules, the game was called right before the half, due to the lopsided score of 48 to 0, with Alvo on top. Fullback Dick Clark was the top scorer, crossing the goal line three times.

The passing strategy was working, but there were few spectators to witness it.

Instead of supporting their home team, a caravan of Alvonites had made the forty mile trip to Ralston to reverence Coach Mayfield and watch his first game, leaving the Alvo bleachers nearly deserted.

## **Cass Conference Champs and a Top Ten Ranking** *Alvo, Nebraska – October 1953*

When Bob heard that the townspeople had delivered a brand new television set to the Mayfields, he swallowed hard and pressed on with practice.

After a second win showcasing Bud Herrmann with three interceptions resulting in touchdowns, the sports writers were lauding Coach Ihrig as the Orioles moved up the ranks. But the locals and the opposing coaches criticized Bob for running up the score, even with reserves playing the third and fourth quarters.

Wasn't that the point in keeping score? To win and win big?

The grumbling bothered Bob, so much that he pulled back and called fewer passing plays, which led to their losing the next two games.

No one in Alvo could remember Coach Mayfield losing two games in a row. No one could imagine Coach Mayfield reacting the way Coach Ihrig behaved when things didn't go his way. He paced the Alvo sideline, threw his arms in the air, and cursed like thunder, unleashing a bevy of verbal attacks on the referees for their ticky-tack calls of clipping and false starts.

These calls and Bob's conduct only served to kill his own team's momentum.

Coach Ihrig reverted to the passing attack in the next two games, beating Eagle 45 to 0 and Talmage 57 to 12.

With two more impressive wins and a close two-point loss to the number one ranked six-man team in the State, the Orioles became the Champions of the Cass County Conference for the fourth year in a row.

The media touted Alvo as having just played the toughest schedule in the State. The major newspapers in Nebraska ranked the Orioles in the Top Ten.

Then why was the grumbling getting worse? The 6 and 3 record was as good as Ollie's rankings, but it didn't seem to matter.

Coach Ihrig was rubbing Alvo the wrong way and it wasn't getting any better.

**Ak-Sar-Ben**  
*(Nebraska Spelled Backwards)*  
*Alvo, Nebraska – November 1953*



*Maisey out in front of their Alvo home*

It seemed as if the townsfolk had taken up sides, and they were siding with Ollie. Game after game, a contingent of Alvonites motored to Ralston, forsaking the support for their home team. The players noticed the lack of backing, even from some of their own parents and it agitated them.

Bob and Maisy were not melding into the community. They were considered outsiders, save for Curly and Bev Doran, who bridged the social gap and made a start to socialize with the Ihrigs. They shared an occasional meal and engaged in a friendly game of ten-point pitch after dinner.

Maisy was struggling to cut back on calories in order to shed some of the pounds she had gained during two pregnancies and she found Bev to be a source of encouragement or in the very least, the association helped Maisy focus on something other than husband and children.

The two couples arranged a day at Ak-Sar-Ben, no children, no students, no constraints. The venue was a forty-five minute drive to the popular horse racing track in Omaha, where the track drew some of the finest Thoroughbreds in the country.

Maisy was in her element, studying the horses, betting the lines, and winning more often than she lost. At home on the farm in Indianola, she had raced horses and gone to rodeos; and now, being 21, not only could she gamble, she could order a drink, and that, she proceeded to do.

While Bob sipped a tall Tom Collins, Maisy ordered cheap whiskey, and with each ample swallow, her intimidations fell away and she felt her spirit revive.

## **The Gym that Ollie Built** *Alvo, Nebraska – November 1953*



The gym that Coach Mayfield built

No one in Alvo doubted Coach Ihrig's will to win. By the time basketball rolled around, the boys had begun to accept their coach's sharp style of coaching. His intention from day one was not to tear down, but to build up.

Senior forwards, Dick Clark at 6'2" and Fred "Bud" Herrmann at 6'3" were returning starters from a team that made it all the way to the State Basketball Tournament in Lincoln the year before. Three other lettermen from last year's squad made up a respectable starting five for Coach Ihrig's first season.

The opener became a dramatic win as the team overcame a half-time deficit. Then the Alvo Orioles followed up with four more victories to begin the 1953-54 campaign in grand fashion. The tall boys, Clark and Herrmann, led the scoring and the season was underway.

Displayed in the gym were banners announcing "The Gym that Ollie Built," which still hung on the walls behind the three rows of bleachers that were strangely and certainly half-empty. The group of Alvonites, ever in support of their previous coach, continued to caravan to Ralston, deserting their hometown boys.

The gym was a new structure, but the new coach didn't like it. The dome building had been built hurriedly in a matter of months and all its shortcomings were clearly discernible.

The worst of it was the inefficient hot water heater. Woefully, it could not begin to deliver the amount of hot water needed to shower two teams of sweaty high school boys after games, hard-fought and won or lost.

## **Verl's Regret** *Indianola, Nebraska – December 1953*

With a 5 and 0 start, complacency set in; and consequently, the Alvo Orioles lost two of their next three games. By twenty points, the losses were significant ones, and criticism of the new coach fired up again, putting a damper on the whole of Christmas break.

The Ihrig little family packed the car and journeyed west, back to spend a few days with those who knew them best.



*Verl Chitwood reading the McCook Daily Gazette*

At the Chitwoods, they found Verl brooding over a story he had just read in the *McCook Gazette*. The article celebrated the joy of an Indianola farmer who had discovered oil on his land. It had made Chuck Barber one of the wealthiest men in Red Willow County.

Large pools of oil deposits were being pumped out of the nine hundred acres of dryland south of Indianola where the Chitwoods rented, farmed, and had passed up the opportunity to buy.

Dora Mae's youngest brother, Jim, had urged his parents to buy the land when they had the chance, but Verl had deemed a bank loan was too risky an investment.

Chastising himself now, Verl knew the rest of his life would be full of hard work, hard luck, and a constant grind to make ends meet.

## **Another Divorce** *McCook, Nebraska – December 1953*

The little family continued onward west to visit Clara, newly divorced for the second time and settled in McCook in a tiny trailer bought by her brother-in-law Ervin Coyle, and parked in Joe and Izella Trimmer's back yard.

Clara's marriage to Ron Miller had ended much like her first marriage, only it had lasted months instead of years.

Within a few months of moving to Washington, Ron Miller had been fired from his job. Still, he had left the house every day, dressed for work; but in truth, he had been dressed for play. He went to the bars and drank and gambled and hung out with other women.

By the time the utility companies began to send notices of discontinuation of services due to non-payment, Ron Miller had gotten some other woman pregnant.

Clara wanted nothing to do with another unfaithful man and a child who was not hers. She had packed a suitcase and boarded a bus to take her home to McCook where she had filed for divorce.

Twice married, twice divorced; and in those days, a certain rarity and an undeniable stigma. Never again, Clara vowed.

But to Pammy Sue and Bobby Mark their grandma was right where she belonged and to celebrate Christmas Eve, Mrs. Trimmer delivered a batch of cookies, sweet and delicious and the most beautifully decorated homemade cookies ever made.



*Bobby Mark & Pammy Sue outside of Grandma Clara Miller's Car Trailer*

## **The Mumps**

*Alvo, Nebraska – January 1954*



*Front Row: Mike Heier Student Manager, Jim Morgaridge, Arlan Neben, Fred "Bud" Herrmann, Dick Clark, Noble Fisher, Coach Bob Ihrig  
Top Row: Mickey Lipskey, Jim Hermance, Bill Schuelke, Lee Fisher, Bob Garcia*

After Christmas and the New Year, basketball began again and in a burst of success, the Alvo Orioles won the next four games. With their 10 and 2 record, there was the positive possibility to compete for the State title.

Coach Ihrig pushed the players harder and harder, yet two of the starters were losing ground. They weren't eating and had become so weak they could barely walk from the locker room to the gymnasium court. When Coach touched one of the boys, he realized he was burning up with fever.

It was the mumps. They were contagious and the doctor quarantined them for a minimum of two weeks.

Knowing that it was just a matter of time before more of the boys came down with the virus, Coach lost hope that the rest of the season would be very successful.

What a fickle predicament!

## **Depleted and Defeated**

### ***Alvo, Nebraska – February 1954***

Dwindling numbers of players allowed for transportation to the next game at Papillion by way of a few cars.

From the onset, it seemed the officiating was biased toward the home team. Two Oriole starters fouled out on questionable infractions; and by the time a third starter was ejected with seven minutes left in the fourth period, Coach Ihrig came unglued.

The ejected Alvo player had only questioned the referee about the foul enforced when the Papillion player had struck *him* in the face with an elbow.

When Coach Ihrig rushed onto the court and exploded at the official, he was whistled for a technical foul.

When it became evident that his outburst at the referee had no positive impact, Coach Ihrig gathered his team and marched off the court, leaving 43 to 32 as the final score in a Papillion win and an Alvo forfeiture.

The players wanted to play out the game, but they had no choice and followed their Coach out of the gym.

Never before had a coach in Alvo demonstrated such an act of poor sportsmanship. The community and school board reaction was predictable.

Understandably, the team's focus escaped and they lost four of their last seven games.

The handwriting was on the wall. Bob knew his contract would not be renewed.

## **Volleyball and Track**

### ***Alvo, Nebraska – March 1954***

In small schools, the coach was truly the coach. He coached everything.



*Front Row: Coach Bob Ihrig, Darlene Johnson, Rita Hermance, Eleanor Gilmore, Eleanor Kellogg, Norma Winget, Mary Louise Eckery, Carol Fischer Student Manager*  
*Second Row: Patsy Roelofsz, Bonnie Olsufka, Marilyn Sutton Student Manager, Evelyn Fisher, Nancy Printz, Carol Printz*

That included girls volleyball which consisted of twelve matches played prior to boys' basketball.

As it turned out, volleyball became Bob's psychological therapy. Coaching the girls' team had a calming effect on an otherwise keyed up coach.

Studying rules and strategy, Coach Ihrig became a big proponent of the game and its resultant physical benefits for the participants.

High school and junior high aged girls made up the team and the young ladies were enthusiastic about participating and harbored no ill feelings toward their coach, who expected them to run laps and practice drills and scrimmage and win.

Even though the girls came out on top of only three of the twelve matches, Coach wasn't overly disappointed because of the benefit of the sport and the competition had still been obtained and there was a certain satisfaction in just playing.

It was the same with boys' track. They ran, they jumped, they threw. And they gained individual honors and team medals. It was just too bad that this contentment was not going to last.

## Senior Sneak Day

*Concordia, Kansas – May 1954*



*1954 Senior Class of Alvo High School, Robert Ihrig Class Sponsor*

Six boys and one popular girl would be graduating that year. And according to tradition, the Class of 1954 faculty sponsor was responsible for planning and chaperoning Senior Sneak Day. Coach, principal, and classroom teacher Mr. Ihrig was the senior class sponsor and he organized the secret getaway.

On an undesignated day in May, two cars motored south to Kansas, where the seven students toured the Concordia High School shop class. Then from an airfield outside the city, the seniors were treated to a plane ride for the first time in their short, young lives. Soaring high above the Kansas plains, the group marveled at the tiny miniatures below.

After lunch, the sponsor had planned some free time and five of the boys disappeared into a downtown bar leaving Darlene Johnson and Lee Fischer to explore the streets of Concordia on their own.

Unlike the dry community of Alvo, Kansas sold 3.2 beer, with the legal age of 18 and the Nebraska five decided that Senior Sneak was the day to try something new.

Needless to say, the school board heard the details of the escapade, and Bob's fate was sealed.

## **Lincoln Liberty Life**

### ***Alvo, Nebraska – June 1954***

How does a school teacher make enough money to support his family?

By working every summer, all summer, and sometimes in between.

At Kearney State Teachers College, Bob had worked selling health and life insurance for Lincoln Liberty Life and it was the best thing to do when he was finished at Alvo.

Richard Printz had graduated from Alvo the year before Bob arrived, and had been struggling at insurance sales for Lincoln Liberty Life. He needed some sales training and direction, so Printz was sent out with Bob, and the two set off each morning, cold calling on farmers and small town citizens for the opportunity to purchase a policy.

Between calls, there were miles of road time and the two men entertained themselves with music on the radio and a guessing game called “Name that singer!” Sometimes both were stumped, but both Bob and Printz always knew that the lovely Miss Patti Page sang “(How Much is that) Doggie in the Window.”

It was a number one hit and one the men knew all the words to. Under the influence of the simple lyrics delivered by an irresistible woman, Americans were buying more puppies that year than ever before. It seemed every house in town had a small dog and every house on a farm had a huge dog and none of them liked Printz.

Perhaps they smelled his fear, and some of the time, he stayed in the car while Bob went up to the house, petting the dog as he walked, while the dog licked Bob’s hands and sniffed his shoes, picking up the scent of his Taffy at home.

After two months of training from Bob, and the sale of only four policies, Printz gave up and enlisted in the Air Force. As difficult as the military was, it seemed easier than selling insurance.

After two months, Bob sold over forty policies and had sent résumés to countless high school across the state.

## **Consolidation**

### *State of Nebraska – July 1954*

Consolidation! The word brought fear into the hearts of school children and parents and communities.

To the students, it was the disruption of a comfortable and well-known routine. It was the fear of everything unknown – new teachers, different classes, strange buildings, more competition, harder classwork, commutes on buses, unheard of towns, stiffer requirements, and possible personal failings.

It was a matter of money. There was simply not enough of it to run a school with all the expense when there was not enough population to support it.

School boards met endlessly to try and solve the problems, but most of the time, decisions were postponed and the only decisions made were to cut teachers' salaries which they did with regularity. The schools still ran in the red.

With increasing requirements for educational excellence and dwindling populations came adjustments in accreditation. Most always, smaller schools went backward in class status.

With a rise in college enrollment, it made a difference where an applicant attended high school. Bigger most always was better and with families moving off the farm, the issue seemed to be insurmountable.

Such was the case at Yutan in Saunders County, a community with a population of less than three hundred, but just twenty-five miles west of Omaha. Yutan's townsfolk thought they would see big city people searching for small town life, but time had shown the opposite.

All summer long, the Yutan school board had tried to work out consolidation details, but stubbornness stalled any achievable merger, leaving the board in a scramble to fill staff vacancies.

Luckily for Bob, he had sent a résumé to Yutan.

## **City of Yutan** *Yutan, Nebraska – Early August 1954*

If Bob was hired as coach in Yutan, he could easily enroll in a master's program at the University of Omaha. Yutan's proximity to the largest city in Nebraska was appealing and would weigh in as a positive if Bob got the job.

Arriving several hours early for the interview, he set out to get some sense of community and drove toward the skyscraper-sized grain elevators towering above two lines of railroad tracks, one for the Union Pacific and one for the Burlington Route. The massive elevators stored corn and soybeans, milo and wheat, which eventually would travel on freight cars to distant markets.

Housing supplies of grain was unhurried work, and when Bob pulled over to check out the depot, he found a handful of old geezers perched on wooden crates playing cards, smoking cigarettes, and sipping stiff coffee.

When they asked Bob his business, he gave them an honest reply. They stopped their game and offered him a seat. The undeclared leader of the group launched into a story about their German ancestors and the tornado of 1913, which touched down on Easter Sunday and took two hundred homes in its path. The old man confessed that Yutan had never really recovered from the devastation and the other men nodded in agreement.

Another wizened card player suggested that Bob might visit the Rusty Rooster, the oldest bar, or the Chief, a place named for the high school Chieftain teams, and supported by a younger

crowd. Or he could have lunch at John's Tavern, where the specials were no doubt some of the best he'd ever have.

Bob decided to explore past the city limits and headed for Miller's Café. In the late summer heat, he rolled down the Crosley's windows and found a strong signal out of Omaha. KFAB, 1110 am on the radio, was airing Lyle Bremser, who was giving his prediction for the upcoming Nebraska Cornhusker football season. Bremser's unmistakable voice served to put Bob in a hopeful frame of mind as he angled into Miller's Café parking lot.

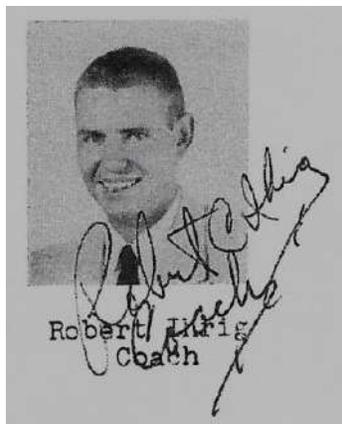
He steered next to a shiny red and white 1955 Chevrolet convertible, and took a moment to admire the new model and striking design changes in just one year.

When Bob opened the front door, the blare of Bill Haley and his Comets was playing "Shake Rattle and Roll" on the jukebox. The song was skyrocketing up the charts, but Bob thought the tune was too strong, too jumpy, and almost out of control.

Miller's Café was crowded with high schoolers, eating hamburgers and sipping malts, but mainly milling around the place, shouting above the too-loud music, and making plans for the school semester that was soon to begin.

## **Yutan High School**

*Yutan, Nebraska – Mid August 1954*



*Coach Bob Ihrig Yutan H.S. Yearbook Photo*

Bob kept thinking about fast music, glitzy cars, and girls in poodle skirts, saddle shoes, and bobby socks. The world had surely changed in just a few short years. And he had been so preoccupied with coaching, he had hardly noticed.

Three days after his interview, a call came from the Yutan superintendent. In a desperate attempt to keep the school open and increase its appeal, the school board voted to add football.

Having started the football program in Venango was a convincing point on Bob's résumé. Maintaining a winning football record in Alvo was another score in his favor.

For two years Earl Dasher had struggled at being superintendent, teacher, and coach – with sub-par results. Hiring a full time coach should have been a relief to him, but Mr. Dasher wasn't happy with the school board's decision. Still, he was ultimately accountable for the success of the athletic programs at school, so he brought in what he determined was the best coach for the money.

Bob's contract held him responsible for all team sports, a few classes to teach, and the start-up of a new football program.

Thankfully, the financial package included a school-owned home his family would live in. It saved them from trying to find a house in the short period of time before the start of football season.

With so few houses available in Yutan, having a place to move to immediately was a godsend. The little family would be there in a week.

## **Hubert “Hub” Peters** *Yutan, Nebraska – August 1954*

At its heart, the push for Yutan football had come from Hubert Peters, president of one of the oldest businesses in town – the Bank of Yutan. “Hub” Peters was on the city council and the school board and most everyone in Saunders County knew him.

Hub had been taking his twin sons and their friends to the football games in Lincoln for several years. Watching Cornhusker football had convinced him that adding football would benefit not only the boys, but the entire school; and thereby, the whole community.

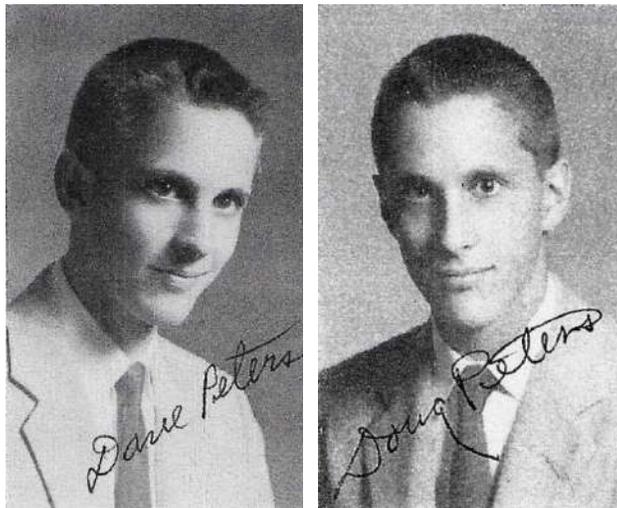
They would need cheerleaders, a pep club, a marching band, and concessions.

But with only thirty-three students currently enrolled in grades 9 through 12, Yutan was sadly inadequate to fill the needed roles.

Was it too late to build up the school, or was consolidation inevitable?

“Hub” Peters let his opinion be known that football was Yutan’s only hope. And beyond saving the school, he wanted to hand Dave and Doug, his twin sons what they had always wished for – playing football in front of family and friends under lights on Friday nights.

### **Dave and Doug Peters** *Yutan, Nebraska – Mid August 1954*



*Dave and Doug Peters*

Boys and balls! That’s how Dave and Doug Peters were raised – playing baseball and basketball in an atmosphere of sporting enthusiasm constructed by their father.

Yet the only football they played was in their backyard, where Dave filled the role of quarterback while Doug ran passing routes and mimicked the running backs they had watched at the University of Nebraska.

Dave revered the flashy, yet obscure half-back of the San Francisco 49ers, Dickey Moegle. And Doug idolized little-known Goose Tatum, an American Negro League baseball player who also played basketball for the Harlem Globetrotters.

When “Hub” announced the addition of football at Yutan for the twins’ senior season, the Peters’ household became a place of celebration.

Dave and Doug unofficially assigned themselves as coaching assistants, and went about helping set up the playing field.

Behind the three-story school house was the most level piece of ground available and it was not totally flat, but they marked off the field of play at an oblique angle and fashioned the yard markers out of donated car tires, sliced in half and inverted. They were placed around the perimeter of the field and painted with the respective yard marking. Wooden planks served as goal posts and the field was ready for chalking.

Satisfaction and anticipation for the start of football season filled the atmosphere in the home of Dave and Doug Peters that late summer.

## **Football Practice** *Yutan, Nebraska – Late August 1954*

Dressing for success was to Coach Ihrig not only a philosophy of winning, but a love of showmanship. He had already ordered equipment and uniforms and was anxiously waiting for them to arrive. White helmets with a red stripe down the middle matched the two-colored thick cotton jerseys. White stripes on the sleeves, white shoulders and red below, with the player’s number in white stitched onto the red.

Every boy in high school and two from eighth grade showed up the first day of practice, two weeks before school. Not one of the fifteen wanted to be left out. And the first words they heard from the new coach was that he intended to win.

Unwittingly, Coach held to the George Halas theory that keeping score settled a winner and a loser. If the boys wanted to win, they'd better do everything he asked of them.

Coach explained the game, drilled them on rules, expounded on football strategies, and hounded them on the importance of first downs.

A two hour practice in the morning was followed by another two hour practice after lunch. Calisthenics. Wind sprints. High steps through tire rings. The worst of it was pushing a heavy metal sled around the field while Coach balanced atop it like a chariot driver cracking the whip.

Coach believed in demonstrating what he expected of the players. When he came to practice in full gear, the boys knew what was coming. When Coach got the ball, he ran straight through the line, hitting a defender hard who tried to risk a tackle. Problem was, no one could tackle him and it would take two or three boys working together to bring him down.

If a boy didn't execute a play or Coach's specific instruction, he was chastised unmercifully in front of the others, yelled at, and kicked in the butt. Coach cursed and hollered and never let up for two hours.

By the end of the practice session, the boys were exhausted and sore as hell.

The players' initial naïve enthusiasm was eventually replaced by serious commitment for those who stuck it out. And remarkably, all of them did.

## **Yutan Chieftains Football**

### ***Yutan, Nebraska – September 1954***

Never had the boys had a coach who was as aggressive and obsessively determined as Coach Bob Ihrig.



*Bottom Row left to right: Gary Stange, Roger Witte, Keith Kraemer, Donald Frahm, Larry Trost, Richard Thomas, Charles Frahm  
Top Row" Butch Drews, Student Manager, Allen Arp, Eddie Sievers, Lyle Miners, Dennis Johnston, Doug Peters, Dave Peters,  
Allan Lehnert, Wesley Zaugg, Coach Bob Ihrig*

He was intensely animated and cursed continuously, yet his demands were delivered with an occasional warm smile and a sense of fun sparkling in his eyes enough times that the players poured out maximum effort to perform well for the man who was driving them so hard.

When roster spots were decided, Dave Peters was made the starting quarterback and his brother Doug was appointed end on offense and defense. The team voted Dave in as captain and the six-man inaugural football season was about to begin.

St. Mary's came from David City as the first school to be the opponent on the new field. There were no sideline bleachers, but seventy-five hometown Yutans brought blankets and folding chairs and picnic baskets to make the first football game a memorable event.

Senior running back Don Frahm crossed the goal line early in the game and it was recorded as the first touchdown in school history, but it was the only score for the home team and the Yutan Chieftains lost 6 to 26.

Pep club girls and football boys piled into parents' cars to motor to Cortland for the second game. The school had no buses but the Yutans had found a way to make this work. The offense double their output, but the defense underperformed with a final tally of 12 to 42.

Luther Academy was scheduled from nearby Wahoo to be the third opponent of the season, but they never arrived. Their forfeiture gave the Chieftains their first ever win and the score was recorded as 2 to 0.

Another loss came at the hands of Prague in the fourth game but Yutan scored three touchdowns and they refused to lose heart even though the defense gave up six touchdowns.

By the time Coach Ihrig's team played Millard the following week, things had begun to click and the Chieftains won 20 to 6. Dave and Doug Peters hooked up on two touchdown passes reminiscent of games played in their backyard at home.

The team carried Coach off the field that night while they celebrated a half-season record of 2 and 3.

## **Meltdown**

### *Cedar Bluffs, Nebraska – Early October 1954*

Optimism stepped over the line to complacency, and in the next game against the Cedar Bluffs Wildcats, the Chieftains couldn't do anything right.

On the one hand, the Wildcats scored on every possession and looked like the best team in Nebraska with a score of 32 to 7 at half-time.

In the Chieftain locker room, Coach Ihrig stormed at the players for twenty minutes straight. The conclusion of his tirade was that if they played respectably in the second half, they probably wouldn't win, but at least they could save face.

But when the Cedar Bluffs coach put in his second string at the beginning of the third quarter, it was like throwing dirt on a dying fire.

Coach Ihrig was humiliated and determined to fight back, but instead of channeling his efforts in getting the boys to rally, he attacked his own team. When Keith Krahmer fumbled the

ball, Coach grabbed the senior running back by his jersey and shook him like a rag doll, all while a vicious string of vulgarity was unleashed on the battered young man.

The crowd fell silent as they witnessed the worst display of anger against a player they had ever seen.

When Coach Ihrig let go of Keith, the young man walked slowly to where his parents were sitting in the bleachers and at that moment, he quit the team.

The mercy rule was enforced late in the third quarter when the referees called the game. The score went down as 7 to 59, but more inconceivably, the Coach who one game previously was a hero, had now become the villain.

## **Squad Mutiny** *Yutan, Nebraska – Mid October 1954*

The superintendent was waiting for Bob Monday morning, and blasted him the second he entered the schoolhouse. There would be no football practice because there was no team. Everyone had quit. Furthermore, an emergency meeting of the school board had been scheduled. Bob could come to the meeting that evening if he had anything to say. The board would convene to discuss the possible release of the coach due to gross misconduct at the game.

Earl Dasher called the meeting to order and asked for quiet amid angry voices in the audience reliving Coach Ihrig's behavior during last Friday night's game. In the front row sat Herman Kraemer, father of Keith, the running back who had been the object of Bob's rage.

With the recommendation of immediate termination for Coach Ihrig, Superintendent Dasher offered his services as interim coach for the remainder of the season. He had a basic understanding of football and could also step in as basketball coach. He would rather be burdened with extra duties than to stand by and watch a coach abuse the players during games and practices. He emphasized that any coach who kicks his players should not be coaching.

Bob stood up then and stretched to his full height to apologize with a truly remorseful and contrite spirit. He vowed to not push the boys at practice with his foot on their backsides. He wasn't so hardened with his own anger that he couldn't see his own wrong and other people's viewpoints and promised to control himself during games.

Hub Peters stood up then and felt compelled to speak on behalf of his sons and in defense of Coach Ihrig. "Certainly, Coach should control his temper, but to change direction in mid-season would be more harmful than beneficial." His sons had no issue with their coach; and indeed, they liked him. "Why not give Coach a second chance?" If it happens again, he would be gone, instantly, without discussion, no questions.

## **Apology to the Krahmers** *Yutan, Nebraska – Mid October 1954*

It was decided to give Coach Ihrig a second chance, provided he apologize to Keith Krahmer and the boy's parents.

Keith should have been the last person the coach attacked. Keith was kind and considerate and had been the victim of rheumatic fever just like his coach.

Wind sprints left Keith panting for air. Lifting weights squeezed his heart. The fever had made its mark and Keith just didn't have the stamina he had had before he spent a semester convalescing in the hospital.

Coach Ihrig understood what Keith had gone through and commended the Krahmers for letting their son play sports in spite of the fever's toll.

Bob had never told any of his players that his mother had kept him away from sports. It had been a secret he hid from boys because he didn't want them to know he was so very inexperienced in actually being an athlete.

Keith's mother sat quietly beside her husband and when Bob unburdened his own personal medical history, she cried.

The conclusion of the visit was reconciliation. Confession. Justification. Forgiveness. And Keith rejoined the team.

## **Rivalry Week** *Yutan, Nebraska – Late October 1954*

When practice resumed on Wednesday, the team knew it would be a short two days before they played their intense rival, the Mead Raiders.

What the players didn't know was why there had been no practice on Monday or Tuesday. They apparently were unaware of Coach Ihrig's behavior against Keith, or about the school board meeting, or about the apology at the Krahmer home on Tuesday evening.

The boys had not quit the team. They just assumed they were given time off because of their poor performance at the game. That's what each one concluded when Superintendent Dasher called them on Saturday. Only Keith had the full details, and he had already put it behind him.

As it turned out, two days of practice were all the team needed. It's difficult to pinpoint why players play so poorly in one game and so well in the next, but that's exactly what happened on Friday night. The Chieftains didn't even look like the same team.

Mead High School was just close enough to Yutan and just big enough to be the rivals they were. There were boys and girls who lived in Yutan who attended the larger and newer school at Mead.

The parents of the turncoat students felt their children were getting a better education at Mead. The larger school wanted Yutan to consolidate with them and it only served to foster the acidity between the two schools.

Thus the battle began.

The Chieftains played truly inspired ball. Dave Peters threw three touchdown passes to his twin Doug and senior running back Eddie Sievers rushed for two more scores to put the Raiders down.

Yutan ended on top at 35 to 24. That which began so sadly became the happy end of Rivalry Week.

## **The Dave, Doug & Keith Show** *Yutan, Nebraska – Late October 1954*

The Chieftains were on a roll, at least for the moment.

Against Valparaiso the next week, Yutan was the superior team. The twins kept connecting and Dave and Doug hooked up together on two touchdowns and Dave ran the ball in for two more scores.

The play of the game went to Keith Krahmer, who took a lateral pitch from quarterback Dave and ran wide around the side on a reverse, and sprinted the fifty yards for six more points.

While the spectators rose to their feet and cheered, Keith bent over on the sideline to regain his breath. It took some recovery time, but when he raised his head, the joy on his face more than made up for the woes of the game played two weeks before.

Forty to 20 was the final. Forty was the highest point total for Bob's boys that year. Forty wouldn't be seen again in 1954.

## **Mercy Rule** *Ceresco, Nebraska – Early November 1954*

In sports there is no such thing as resting on past victories because when a team does that, the next contest might surely end in defeat.

Yutan went on the road to play an experienced and talented Ceresco squad. Yutan looked like the underdogs that they were. Ceresco scored every time they took the ball. Yutan played hard, but they were no match for the superior team.

Surprisingly, Coach Ihrig stayed calm. He built up his team on the sidelines and tried to find some positives in the disastrous contest. In the locker room at half-time, he didn't beat the boys up with words. Instead, he used encouragement, praising their efforts, and patted them wholeheartedly as they passed him in the doorway.

If Coach hoped his buildup of the team would change the course of the game, that was not the case.

Ceresco emerged onto the field in the second half ready to force the shutdown of the game. The starters lined up on the field making their intention clear. If they scored unmercifully, the mercy rule would be applied, and they could claim a victory without completing the game.

The taunting and bragging and sneers from the Ceresco players only served to make the Yutan boys more determined to play well enough to finish out the clock.

To keep his team fresh, Coach Ihrig kept rotating the players. Not so for their opponent and it became evident that Ceresco was losing steam, so much so that Yutan stayed in the game and scored 26 points.

Granted, Ceresco still won with 72 points, but it had been a gallant effort.

In the mind of Coach Ihrig, the Yutan players had won. Sometimes a victory is measured not by a winning score, but by not giving up.

## **Preparing for the Final Game** *Yutan, Nebraska – Early November 1954*

Too quickly, the season was drawing near its conclusion.

At the beginning of the year, Coach Ihrig had called to arrange a game with his former school at Alvo. The present Oriole coach had snickered and declined the invitation. It was laughable that the Alvo Oriole powerhouse would line up against the new and inexperienced Yutan Chieftains.

On second thought, why not conclude the year by securing an easy victory, make it the Homecoming game, and end the season on a high note? Thus reasoned the Alvo coach.

Bob had a few friends left in Alvo and they had called him to gossip surrounding the match-up with Yutan. There was a certainty that prevailed in the community and it looked like an Alvo victory over Yutan, an overwhelming victory for Alvo, a crushing defeat for Yutan.

It sounded like revenge to Bob.

And he was determined to get his team ready. Practices were focused and methodical, and Coach drilled the Yutan players on strategies and skills and prepared them against the Alvo team and star player Mickey Lipskey. It was an advantage that Coach knew their strengths and weaknesses, and especially their tendencies.

If Yutan won, every player would earn a letter in football. It was a promise. An incentive. If only they could make it happen.

## **Alvo Orioles vs. Yutan Chieftains** *Alvo, Nebraska – November 11, 1954*

Parents and players stuffed into cars. Equipment was stowed into trunks. Four or five teenagers in the rear seat; three adults in the front.

An hour south from Yutan, they made the trip with resoluteness. The red and white Chieftains and their steadfast supporters spilled out from the vehicles and pushed toward the field, ready to meet their much-publicized opponent – the black and orange Alvo Orioles.

Alvonites celebrated on the sidelines and a few boosters were seen placing bets with friends and foes.

Within the first minute of play, the Alvonite contingency burst forth chanting, “blowout, blowout, blowout,” as Mickey Lipskey ran across the goal line for the first touchdown.

It wasn’t going to be as easy as the wagers suggested when Doug Peters scored on a touchdown pass thrown by his twin Dave.

The remainder of the first half was a defensive battle and when time ran out, the score was tied at 7.

The strong and conditioned Yutan Chieftains were holding their own; indeed, they were edging closer to a possible victory – one predicted by Coach Ihrig during his half-time locker room rally.

Allan Lehnert scored for the underdogs soon after the beginning of the third quarter by picking off an errant Oriole pass. That was followed by a trick play, a quarterback forward lateral to the big guy, center Dennis Johnston, who lumbered across the goal line for another score. The next time Yutan had the ball, it was a repeat of a quarterback pass to his twin brother and up they went by three scores.

Coach Ihrig paced the sidelines after Lipskey scored again. Yutan was experienced enough that they knew being up by two scores was not a comfortable lead.

When Alvo scored again, the pacing became near panic, but the clock ran out and Homecoming for Alvo took a mournful turn.

The final, Alvo 22 – Yutan 27, was celebrated by the Chieftains for weeks and months and years.

And thus it goes in sports. Sometimes the loser; sometimes the winner. But always, stay in the game.

## **Pep Club and Babysitters**

*Yutan, Nebraska – Mid November 1954*



*1954-1955 Yutan Pep Club*

*Kneeling, L to R: Karen Heldt, Sandra Schulz, Cheerleaders*

*Standing: L to R: Karma Smith, Jean Zwiebel, Barbra Mumm, Laurel Thomas, Judy Dasher, Norma Jacobs  
Laura Mae Drews, Sharon Witte, Mary Ann Karloff, Janet Miller, Jolene Sievers*

For a first season in football, five wins and five losses were commendable. The local loyal merchants deemed it more than commendable and donated money to reward the team with a steak dinner at Miller's Café on Saturday night.

Coach Bob Ihrig would present the football letters, a tradition which dictated that a school letter, "Y," awarded for hard work and superior performance, was attached to the player's leather and wool school jacket.

Some of the pep club girls would be at Miller's Café, but Norma Jacobs would be babysitting. She was Coach's favorite sitter and Norma was eager to watch the Ihrig children and earn 25¢ per hour.

Norma was the best girls volleyball player and one of the most dependable young people Coach Ihrig knew. She had gone to a country school until her freshman year when she began high school at Yutan.

It was not easy to break into the urban life at school in Yutan. The farm kids had a hard go at integration in town and some of her rural friends had chosen Mead High instead.

Through volleyball, Norma had found a way to fit in and she understood the popular pecking order better than some of her peers or the teachers who came and went. Coach Ihrig liked to talk with Norma and get her perspective of young social life in Yutan.

Norma had made the varsity volleyball squad her freshman year even though she had never played the game. The team would have gone to an end-of-season tournament had it not been for lack of funds and a very ill coach's wife.

In Norma's sophomore year, Earl Dasher arrived in Yutan as a teacher and took over as volleyball coach but it wasn't a good year for the girl's team and not many of the young women liked his coaching style.

In Norma's junior year, Dasher became superintendent and Coach Ihrig arrived and most of the girls were eager for him to take over coaching volleyball.

Anticipation for the volleyball season ran high and the girls remembered the recent past with school and community support as solid as it was for boys basketball.

And thus it goes. The hopeful prospect of the coming matches and a successful season brought a spark to the bleak days of that Yutan winter.

## **Time Away**

### ***Eastern Nebraska – Fall 1954***



*Peony Park Ballroom Omaha, Nebraska*

School and sports and being around students kept Bob enlivened, but for a twenty-six year old, he looked around for more.

Yutan was in a perfect spot proximate to Omaha, yet remotely positioned in Saunders County farmland, not far from the Platte River, where Coach Ihrig and some of the high school boys hunted ducks. In pheasant season, they took to the fields and brought down the birds so plentiful as the days grew shorter.

School and sports during the weeks. Adventure on the weekends. Movies, dancing, drinking, gambling. Every Saturday night, something faddish and bright, was meant to take away the perceived dullness of rearing toddlers for Maisy and the more important seriousness of teaching and coaching for Bob.

Movies with Marilyn Monroe or Frank Sinatra or James Dean. Horse race betting at Aksarben. Dance Island in Wahoo. Sportsman's Club east of Yutan. The Peony Park Ballroom in Omaha.

Another episode. Another weekend. Excite. Arouse. Invigorate.

## **Inspiration** *Omaha, Nebraska – Fall 1954*

The Omaha Public Library and the library on the campus of the University of Omaha became a Saturday morning sanctuary for Bob.

Quiet and peace in a place filled with books and journals, whose information lay ready to saturate the mind and spirit of one willing Coach.

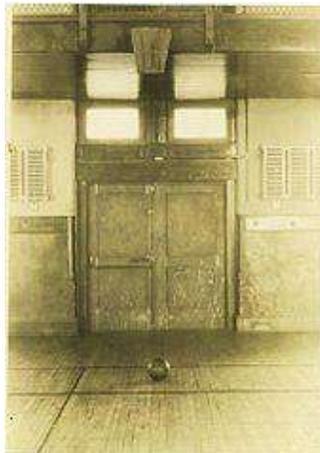
First, he flipped through the glossy pages of the weekly edition of *Sports Illustrated*. Ever since its first issue on August 16, 1954, Bob had read each volume.

He found an empty table and stacked what he could find on basketball. Fundamentals. History. Biographies of successful basketball coaches.

Canadian James Naismith was the first director of athletics at McGill University in Quebec. In 1891, he went to Springfield, Massachusetts where he accepted a position at the YMCA.

His first assignment was to come up with an indoor game for rowdy New England boys where they could expend some pent-up energy, yet play inside sheltered from the harsh cold winters. It should be a fair game, challenging, but not horribly rough.

For some reason, Naismith had a deadline, so he thoughtfully went to work outlining thirteen rules for his new game, dubbed “basket ball,” named for two peach baskets he hung in the gymnasium. He had asked the janitor to find two suitable boxes; but instead, the wooden baskets were presented, and they were hung at the two ends of the floor.



*Original 1891 Peach Basket Hoop at Springfield, Massachusetts*

Naismith’s newly invented game grew in popularity and within a short period of time, basket ball was being played at YMCAs across the country.

From Massachusetts, Naismith went to Denver to get a medical degree and then he returned to sports when he was hired by the University of Kansas as their first basketball coach in 1898.

Dr. Naismith’s star player from 1905 to 1907 was young Forrest “Phog” Allen. When Naismith left Kansas in 1907, Phog Allen became coach after him. Then following two seasons

and two conference championships for the Kansas Jayhawks, Allen himself left to study osteopathic medicine, but came back to coaching, eventually returning to Kansas, where he coached football, baseball, and his favorite basketball.

As Bob read about basketball history, and basketball coach heroes, it put him in a winning frame of mind, especially as he sought to emulate those he had read about.

Coach Phog Allen of the Kansas Jayhawks pushed to get basketball teams entered into the Berlin Olympics in 1936, and he helped organize the NCAA Basketball Tournament. His teams had won twenty-five conference titles and three national championships and he was still going strong as the legendary head coach for the Jayhawks.

Allen coached to produce the highest level of player; and inevitably, he produced players who became great coaches, and Adolph Rupp was one of them.

Coach Rupp had led the Kentucky Wildcats since 1930, and the team had chalked up thirteen conference titles and four national championships.

In Goodland and Wichita, Bob had listened to the Jayhawks on his little radio. Phog Allen had caught his attention back growing up in Kansas.

Now on Bob's stack at the library table were books written by Allen and Rupp. He couldn't wait to install their winning strategies at Yutan.

## **Yutan Chieftain Volleyball**

### ***Yutan, Nebraska – Late November 1954***

Fouled again by Dasher!

No sooner had Bob walked into school on Monday that Earl Dasher invoked his superintendent powers and repossessed the girls volleyball coaching. A take-away from Bob.

Dasher claimed that some of the girls were not comfortable with Coach Ihrig's aggressive method of coaching. Bob knew some of the girls were not comfortable with the superintendent as their coach. But Bob maintained silence and let the man in charge have his say.

Dasher cited the impropriety of Bob's taking high school boys on hunting excursions. What should that have to do with girls volleyball?



*Front Row L to R: Barbra Mumms, Karma Smith, Jolene Sievers, Mary Karloff, Janet Miller, Jeanne Zwiebel  
Back Row: Sandra Schulz, Laurel Thomas, Karen Heldt, Judy Dasher, Norma Jacobs, Laura Drews, Sharon Witte, Coach Earl Dasher*

Bob knew the girls didn't appreciate Dasher's smoking habit. He took constant smoke breaks during practice and his fingers were stained yellow with nicotine. He was high-strung and his face was red from stress or some other reason that no one could guess.

The superintendent's daughter was on the team and the question would be whether or not Dasher could coach impartially. So far that had not been the case. The past year as a freshman, the tall Dasher girl was on the varsity squad and had been granted plenty of playing time, but the gossip was she was not that good and shouldn't have been given so much time on the court. The conclusion of the rumors was that Dasher wanted to remain as coach in order to guarantee his daughter's participation.

It may have been true. Coach Ihrig would have set positions according to skill, and Miss Dasher may have been demoted.

## Yutan Chieftain Basketball

*Yutan, Nebraska – Late November 1954*



*Front Row L to R Junior Varsity Squad: Gary Stange, Roger Witte, Bob McEvoy, Dennis Behrens, Allen Arp, Larry Trost, Lauren Drews, Richard Thomas, Charles Frahm*  
*Back Row Varsity Squad: Keith Krahmer, Eddie Sievers, Lyle Christensen, Dennis Johnston, David Peters, Allan Lehnert, Doug Peters, Wesley Zaugg, Lyle Miners, Donald Frahm, Coach Bob Ihrig*

Without the leadership for girls volleyball, Bob turned his attention to boys basketball.

With keen focus and utmost determination, he called together the team and counted out nineteen boys, ready to play; and moreover, willing to take instruction from the coach who had spent hours devouring offensive plays and defensive strategies from the books he had studied all those Saturdays in Omaha.

Coach Ihrig used the first session to evaluate the boys' skills. He asked them to dribble, pass, pivot, fake, block out, and rebound.

It was a disappointing display. Only a couple of the boys could dribble and their passing attempts were atrocious.

Coach quickly saw why the previous basketball season had been so unsuccessful. He soon learned there was little for the boys to build on because Earl Dasher had coached by lecturing about basketball, not by practicing fundamentals. Coupled with long drawn-out speeches with too many long drawn-out smoke breaks, the result was too few victories for Earl Dasher's team.

There was nothing to do but start at the beginning. Fundamental elements of the game. Dribble and repeat. Pass and repeat. Rebound and repeat. Shoot and repeat.

There wasn't enough time to perfect the basics. All Bob could hope for was to make a decent start.

## **Season Start** *Yutan, Nebraska – December 1954*



*City Auditorium, Yutan, Nebraska*

A rough start indeed! Turnovers and missed shots resulted in two opening losses. Sloppy games played in an ice-cold building on frozen Nebraska nights didn't help.

The stylish art deco Yutan City Auditorium was the setting for both varsity and junior varsity home games. The structure's heat was supplied by woefully inadequate oil heaters. The balcony seating proved to be too uncomfortable for spectators and the locker rooms were too frigid for players to shower.

But back after school at practice, both teams worked and worked hard until the basic fundamentals became easier and more productive.

Practicing the essential components finally paid off when the team won over Luther Academy 50 to 44.

Then at mid-week, Yutan was notified by the Nebraska School Athletic Association that two of the Luther boys were ineligible, resulting in the Academy's forfeiture of the game.

Coach Ihrig protested the action, citing the ruling took away Yutan's record of their performance and the points scored by his players that night. The Association didn't budge. Their decision stood and the official record became 2 to 0.

On the fourth game of the season, Yutan had scheduled a varsity contest, junior varsity game, and a girls volleyball match – all in one night. It proved to be a grand night for Chieftain Athletics when every Yutan team scored on top.

Above all, Dave Peters, team captain of the varsity boys, led the scoring against Nehawka with 27 points from his position as starting forward.

As tradition dictated, the downtown merchants hung brooms outside their doors, indicating a clean sweep.

With positive community support, the varsity squad continued to improve and by half-way into the season, they had earned six wins and lost four. The best yet was a triumph over Coach's former Alvo Orioles by a mark of 56 to 42.

But there was very little time for gloating about boys basketball. Always the spoiler, Earl Dasher let Bob and the whole town know that his girls volleyball had outshone the boys with 8 wins and only 2 losses.

## **First Five**

*Yutan, Nebraska – February 1955*



*Front Row: Doug Peters Forward #66, Coach Bob Ihrig, Dave Peters Forward #44  
Back Row: Keith Kraemer Guard #55, Allen Lehnert Center #11, Don Frahm Guard #00*

Coach coached fairly. The basketball greats whom he had read about played fair and coached fair.

So when Coach Ihrig selected the first five, he chose them as starters because they were the best players. It was the fair thing to do.

They were five seniors who worked hard at practice and played even harder in games.

Doug and Dave Peters were consistently performing forwards. They had started the previous year and Dave averaged 23 points per game, while Doug's skill was setting up shots for his teammates and rebounding and still scoring 12 points himself.

Don Frahm was the second highest score maker with an average of 15 points per game, and his friends Keith Krahmer and Allen Lehnert played guard and center.

Every game is a contest, with the hope of a win, and the possibility of a loss. Unfortunately, two losses against Weston and Springfield opened the second half of the season.

In 39 attempts at the free throw line, Yutan only made 17 baskets facing the Bobcats of Weston, so it seemed the Chieftains were failing at the basics.

More practice was the requirement and in the next five games, they won three.

More practice, done right, paid off, and the best game of the season came against Valparaiso with a 74 point winning score. Of that high, Dave Peters had put up 37 of the total.

By the end of the regular season and 9 wins and 8 losses, Yutan would get more practice time. They would compete in the district tournament, and they had every right to hope for an underdog win.

## **District Tournament**

### ***Wahoo, Nebraska – March 1955***

A reporter from the *Wahoo Newspaper* called Coach Ihrig for an interview before district play began. The reporter hoped to catch some interest; it's how newspapers are sold. The feisty Yutan coach was more than willing to spark a story about his small-town, little-known boys.

Coach said the team had improved greatly; then he pointed out their weakness at making free throws. And when the reporter asked him if they could win more games, the quick response was: "that's something you can bet on!"

The Chieftains met Ft. Calhoun and their star player, Jim Nielson, in the first contest. Ft Calhoun's strategy was to double team Dave Peters, picking on the highest point guy so they could take over. But by the second half, Yutan was gaining the lead and despite Ft Calhoun's effort against Dave Peters, he ended with 18 points. It was a satisfying win for Yutan when the final scoreboard marked Yutan 51 – Ft. Calhoun 39.

The second game for Yutan came against the Weston Bobcats who had beaten them by 20 earlier in the year. The sports writers had predicted that Weston would make it all the way to the state tournament, but over-confidence and cockiness in the Bobcat ranks played a part in their astonishing loss to Yutan.

Bob's boys were conditioned well; they kept their stamina throughout the game. They used the fast break play they had practiced so much until the final score revealed a shocking underdog win, Yutan 67 – Weston 52.

Caught up in the celebration of winning over Weston, Coach handed the keys of the Crosley to Doug Peters – a reward to drive the vehicle home to Yutan for his stellar performance in the game.

It has been a very long time since the Chieftain basketball team had advanced to the finals of district. Back in the 1920s, Yutan had been in the state tournament five times and had won it all in 1924. But nothing since, so even a chance at winning districts was a big deal.

If Yutan won its final game at districts, they would advance to regionals. They were favored over the Prague Panthers, but from the start the Panthers stalled. Prague held the ball for long periods of time and destroyed the fast break style of Yutan.

Bob hated stalling. To him, it destroyed the fun of basketball, and he had never figured out how to break it up.

When the game buzzer sounded in the last agonizing second, Coach glared up at the board: Prague 35 – Yutan 30.

## **At Odds**

### *Yutan, Nebraska – April 1955*

The basketball boys ended the season with 11 wins and 9 losses. Dave Peters was chosen to the All-Conference First Team, but not much notable glory went with the achievement.

The volleyball girls ended with 11 wins and 5 losses. Norma Jacobs was the outstanding player for the girls, yet she was not much recognized either. But Earl Dasher made certain everyone knew his team had a better record than the boys.

Coach Dasher was nearly double Bob's age. Dasher kept the players at arms' length and communicated with them only as needed.

Coach Ihrig had a good time with the players, really talked with them, and derived a certain amount of energy just by being around them. Sometimes he yelled and screamed at them when they didn't perform the way he wanted them to, but they seemed to accept that from him and most everyone knew from his incessant smile that he was their best advocate.

Dasher portrayed inaccessibility in suits and ties and starched plain shirts. He thought Bob should tone it down in the matter of his wardrobe with sports jackets and linen pants and slip-on shoes. Dasher disapproved of Bob's flashy style and his friendly manner of presenting himself.

Aside from the friction between the two men, Bob liked Yutan. He loved the students, saw potential in the players, and appreciated the support of the town. He hoped to stay and build on the year's moderate success.

Unfortunately, Bob was not the one who would decide on whether he would stay or go.

## **Moving Forward**

### *Yutan, Nebraska – April 1955*

Coach's wife didn't go to Coach's games. Not home games. Not away games. With two young children at home, Maisy cooked and cleaned and was at the beck and call of her husband for meals and laundry and other wifely chores.

Horse races, or drinks and dancing on dates were Maisy's sole diversion and she had no thoughts that anything would change soon ... other than when she discovered she was pregnant again.

When she told Bob they would be having their third child in August, he went out in search of a bigger car. The Crosley was made for a single man and had long since reached its maximum usefulness.

After Bob found a 1950 Dodge two-door Coronet Coupe, he went straight to Hub Peters at the bank.

Hub granted Coach Ihrig a loan right then and there, and went on to praise Bob for the season and pledged his support and the support of his fellow merchants in the coming year.

It seemed like this was all going to work out: a good coaching position, a growing family, a flourishing community, a gorgeous new car, and the chance to begin work on his master's degree in the fall at the University of Omaha.

## **Moving On** *Yutan, Nebraska – May 1955*

The future looked bright except for the cloud cast by the shadow of Earl Dasher. He even took full control of Senior Sneak Day, which Bob had hoped he could have a part in.

The class sponsor was naturally the chaperone of the trip and Dasher would accompany one senior girl and eight senior boys to windy Chicago for three fun-filled days.

The Burlington Railroad offered Sneak Day specials to small high schools across Nebraska. The affordable fare left enough funds for hotel and meals, and the itinerary came together.

Planning Sneak Day was not the only thing on the superintendent's mind. A meeting with Coach Ihrig was scheduled before Dasher boarded the train bound north and east.

As a rehearsal, Bob imaged what he wanted to say to the superintendent. After the meeting with Hub Peters at the bank, Bob prepared a little speech of acceptance to be delivered with humility and in a spirit of cooperation. He expected a year's extension on his contract, and was ready to graciously receive it.

But instead, his nemesis spoiled him again. Dasher gave Bob a two-week notice to vacate their home which was owned by the school. No extension. No contract. Done!

## **Funeral House Blues**

### *Wahoo, Nebraska – June 1955*

This was depressing! Three schools in three years. Feeling angry and justified in feeling that way, Bob thought about never having had a losing season in football, basketball, or baseball. Where was the fairness in all of this?

Teaching and coaching seemed to be the most unfair, unstable, ungrateful line of work Bob could have ever chosen. What's more: the pay was lousy.

He'd have to spend another summer selling life insurance and sending out résumés. But the pressing issue was to find a place to live and quickly.

Fifteen miles to the west of Yutan, Bob drove to the county seat of Saunders County. Wahoo had a hospital and a population of 3500. Surely he could sell insurance there and find a home for a family of four, and soon to be five.

Up a gray, long flight of stairs, Bob and Maisy and Pammy and Bobby lugged boxes into a gloomy, glum apartment. It looked more like a dark dormitory, but the worst of it was that the rooms were above a mortuary, and local residents swore the house was haunted. People who had lived there in the past claimed they had seen a ghost.

Ghosts or not, the place was rickety and in dire need of fresh paint. The yard was dirt, not grass and the morbid surroundings made Bob feel as if he had hit rock bottom.

## **Mortuary Mystery**

### *Wahoo, Nebraska – June 1955*

It began the first night in the upper room apartment and never really stopped.

Every night at the chiming of the midnight hour on the old grandfather clock at the far end of the hall, a tall man appeared. Silently, he passed through the night, a cape hanging from his square shoulders, and a wolf's face and head with a hood draped over his grotesque features.

No one in the family talked about it, during the night, nor in the light of day. It was as if talking about it might bring it to life. What's more: each one thought they were the only one who saw the horrible wolfman. Instead, they all stayed in their beds and covered their heads tightly with sheets and blankets and hoped that by lying still, the creature-man would disappear.

It was all real all right and two bullet holes in the front apartment door just added another layer of uneasiness.

Bob had never been one for prayer, but the present circumstances called for it and he began a nightly supplication for deliverance from these current circumstances.

“Please, God! I need a teaching job. Soon!”

## **Kim Louise** *Wahoo, Nebraska – August 4, 1955*

The nurses at the Wahoo Community Hospital oohed and ahed over Bob and Maisy's fine-featured tiny girl.

On the third day of her life, Kim Louise went home and the hospital staff said good-bye to the perfect baby and her worried mother.

Maisy dreaded returning to the apartment. Being up at night with the new baby was going to make the appearance of the wolfman even more terrifying. Was the creature part of a hellish cult or was the mortician playing a morbid and sadistic joke?

## **Prayers Answered** *Wahoo, Nebraska – Mid August 1955*

When tiny Kim was just two weeks old, Bob got a job offer.

A late evening call came from Lloyd Witt of the Otoe, Nebraska school board. The little town was in Otoe County, about fifty miles southwest of Omaha. They had just lost their superintendent and coach and needed a replacement immediately.

The school was unaccredited and had been since 1951. It was a common story. Their financial situation was poor, salaries were substandard, the district resisted consolidation; and two out of five teachers didn't even have college diplomas. Working toward their degrees, the two were teaching with Initial Junior Certificates.

As is so often the case in the plight of school teachers, staff make and take last minute assignments before the beginning of the new semester.

Hub Peters had given an excellent recommendation for Bob to Mr. Witt. Changes had been made in Yutan; and somehow, their superintendent was also gone.

A sense of vindication seeped into Bob's mind when he thought of Earl Dasher. But in the next moment, he thought about a second chance at school administration and an opportunity to attend classes in nearby Omaha.

Mr. Witt concluded the phone conversation to politick for his son Roger, a junior and returning starter for the Otoe basketball team. They had advanced to the regional tournament last year. Bob heard the challenge in that brief remark and would carry it with him in the months to come.

He was relieved. Prayers soon forgotten, yet answered already – Coach was ready to rush on to the next assignment.

## **Wishes and Rules**

### *Otoe, Nebraska – Late August 1955*

Early in the day on a warm summer morning, the Ihrigs piled comfortably into the new Dodge Coupe and set off for Otoe.

Bob was primed to put Yutan and Earl Dasher behind him and plunge in at a new school.

Maisy thought about the work ahead of her. Unpacking boxes. Cleaning. Cooking. Child care. Not much difference from there to here.

As it was, Maisy had holed up at home for several years with no desire to get out except for the occasional trip for dancing and drinking or betting and horse races. It seemed easier for her to stay put, do her work, and carry on with a drink nearby.

But Bob had other ideas and on the drive to Otoe, he made a stand to deliver his expectations.

A coach's wife should attend many of the games. She should host dinner parties. She should socialize more and drink less.

A superintendent's wife should be a super mother, an immaculate housekeeper, and an excellent cook.

That, Maisy could do. Her culinary skills were at the top of her asset list, and she made a promise to find a local farmer who would sell her chickens and eggs.

After a short hour's drive mostly on unpaved roads, Bob turned the Coupe into Otoe. Coming from there in Wahoo, coming here to Otoe, Maisy gazed out the passenger window and made the assessment: "Well – whoop-de-do!"

## **Town of Otoe** *Otoe, Otoe County, Nebraska – Late August 1955*

The Ihrigs made their way through downtown, headed two blocks west, and parked in front of an old frame white house situated catty-corner from the school.

It was owned by the district and was part of the deal for the superintendent. After the midnight hellish traipsing in Wahoo, this would seem like Heaven.

Bob walked through the rooms of the old house, pronounced it good, carried in a few boxes, then abandoned Maisy and the kids while he explored the town.



*Bank of Berlin building in downtown Otoe*

Main Street business buildings covered all of three blocks, most noticeable being the Bank of Berlin on a centralized southwest corner. Otoe had once been Berlin, named by the staunch Lutheran German citizens who had settled in Otoe County, but when anti-German sentiment rose with the outbreak of World War I, several businesses had been the object of arsonists. Thereafter, the community voted to change the name to Otoe. Of course, that only upset other towns in Otoe County; and so, the history goes.

Otoe's 225 inhabitants supported two bars, Dick's Place and the Village Tavern, and Helen's Café, owned and operated by Helen Jacobsen, married to one of Otoe's few non-Germans. Helen had a newly popular juke box and high-back booths, which served to seclude young high schoolers away from watchful eyes.

The general store was owned and operated by Fred Lockman; the drugstore, by Fred Paap. A meat locker, one filling station, the hardware store, blacksmith, television repair shop, dance hall, and People's Beauty Salon. Essentials, and nothing more.

The Farmers Union Co-op was managed by Lloyd Witt, who kept a mental ledger of all the goings on in Otoe and beyond.

Religious affiliation was provided for by the Methodists and two sects of Lutherans – St. Luke’s and St. John’s. If those three groups didn’t suit a citizen, he would have to look elsewhere.

Otoe’s shining moments of history were just that – merely moments. A decade previously, Lawrence Welk and his orchestra played in a barn outside of town that was filled to capacity with a crowd dancing to the popular bubbly champagne music.

And Charles Lindberg visited Otoe, too, when he made an emergency landing in a field south of Otoe during his Goodwill Tour of 1927. America’s new hero spent the night in a boarding house while his plane, the *Spirit of St. Louis*, was repaired by a local automobile mechanic.

Now old men gathered daily at the U.S. post office or the train depot, where they yearned for olden times and other places. They joked about hopping a car North or South on the Missouri Pacific Railroad. But mostly, they talked basketball.

Here in Otoe, old men’s dreams were of the hometown boys, playing in a state tournament. Old men’s dreams became Bob’s aspiration.

## **Driven** *Otoe, Nebraska – September 1955*

Classes, lesson preparation, administrative details, coaching every sport offered in Otoe. All that, and Bob asked for more. He wanted to restart football, so he went to the school board and made his appeal.

They wouldn’t hear of it. There were no funds for it; and besides, high school football in Otoe had an unhappy history.

In 1944, the Otoe Wildcats had been state champions in six-man football, but because of the war, there was no money for a trophy and it had put a damper on their achievement. Then,

two boys were acutely injured a few years later and the school board put the kibosh on the future of football. Their decision hadn't been questioned until Bob came to town. He argued that playing football in the fall would get the boys ready for basketball in the winter.



MR. DALE P. OATMAN  
Gorham State N.H.  
Principal  
English I and II  
American History  
World History  
Consumer Education  
Assistant Coach  
Sophomore Sponsor  
Junior Sponsor  
District Sponsor



MR. RICHARD HUME  
University of Nebraska A.S.  
University of Nebraska N.E.  
Natick



MR. ROBERT C. BREDT  
Newbury State N.H.  
Superintendent  
Coach  
Health  
Religion  
Office Practice  
Type I  
Freshman Sponsor  
Senior Sponsor  
Fish Sponsor  
Award Sponsor  
Attending University  
of Omaha For M.A. Degree



MR. CARL O'WART  
New York State  
Peboduck Initial  
Junior Certificate  
Grammar Room  
1934 9-10



MRS. HOY OATMAN  
Nebraska University  
Nebraska Initial  
Junior Certificate  
Primary Room

*The Five Otoe Teachers for K through 12th*

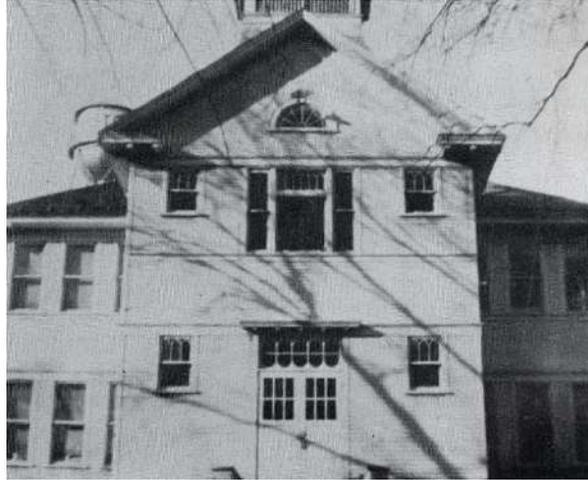
Bob sensed the men's ruling was final, at least for the time being, so he asked permission to referee football in surrounding towns on the weekends. And furthermore, he would be starting classes one night a week in Omaha. Surely, they would have no issue with his pursuit of a master's degree.

And so it went. Classes in Otoe. Classes in Omaha. Lesson preparation and study at the university. Coaching, referring. And most importantly, balancing the meager school budget.

Bob was not about to let a little money get in the way of getting the Otoe school what they needed.

# Old Faithful

*Otoe, Nebraska – September 1955*



*Public School Building in Otoe, Nebraska*

*School Song  
Faithful and true-hearted  
Let us cheer for our "OLD HIGH"  
We revere her and defend her,  
And her colors proudly fly  
We will stand for her united,  
Of her deeds we gladly tell:  
Her colors streaming  
Glad faces beaming  
So here's a cheer for her  
That we all love so well:  
Joyous and ever loyal –  
Let us boost for our "OLD HIGH"  
Let every heart sing.  
Let every voice ring.  
There's no time to grieve or sigh;  
It's ever onward, our course pursuing, may defeat ne'er our ardor cool,  
But united, we will boost for her  
"OUR OLD HIGH SCHOOL"*

When the early Germans named their little settlement Berlin, they never could have predicted the turn in world history which resulted in later generations of the town's students and athletes being derogatorily labeled as Heinies, Krauts, and Nazis.

Being picked on tends to foster an adhesion among those being harassed, so over the decades, as most school environments go, there was a certain and sure positive spirit within the confines of the old school, fondly dubbed "Old Faithful."

The students somehow sensed that high school years were the end of youthfulness in all its freshness, the end of friendships began in kindergarten, but not to be shared as adults. Most

would leave Old Faithful and Otoe, leave the farm, leave their little safe place, even leave their families, because work was limited and opportunities were scarce.

## **Victory Hall**

*Otoe, Nebraska – 1952*



*Victory Hall, Otoe, Nebraska*

Within a few years of building “Old Faithful,” a basketball court was added.

But the court was not regulation size and the basket height was a half-a-foot short. If a player tried to shoot from the corner, he’d hit the balcony; yet still all and all, it’s all they had, so the Wildcats kept on playing. After all, winter basketball was as important as summer baseball and it was a major part of winter life in hometown Otoe.

Thanks to the citizens who raised \$20,000, a new gymnasium, “Victory Hall,” was built with an allocation from the 1951 Board of Education. It was ready for the 1952-1953 season.

The dome style gymnasium was regulation size, and boasted an electronic lighted scoreboard, equipped with a thunderous horn. The three rows of bleachers were so close to the court, there was barely enough room to squeeze past the sidelines.

But it made for a closeness of players and spectators and served somehow to enhance the excitement of the game.

Opposite from the visiting and home locker rooms was the concession stand, where the pep club girls and their mothers sold Coca-Cola and coffee, popcorn and peanuts, and candy bars and hot dogs. The proceeds went into the athletic fund and helped to maintain what was needed.

By the time Bob arrived in 1955, Victory Hall had seen victories won and battles lost, the sweat of young boys permeating the layers of stain and lacquer upon the knotty pine walls.

It smelled good in there, and Bob couldn't wait to stand on the hometown Wildcat sideline.

## **Ron Witt Otoe, Nebraska, May 1954**



*Ron Witt – Nebraska High School Hall of Fame*

The hope of a brilliant basketball future was stoked from a shining past, all set in motion by young Ron Lloyd Witt.

In 1950, a freshman starter, son of Lloyd Witt who served Otoe's school board, could shoot from almost anywhere on the court, even with the inadequacies of the non-regulation venue.

In Ron's last two years of high school, he played in the newly built Victory Hall and it seemed the place was made just for him, where he scored 704 points as a senior, averaged at 32 points a game.

The Wildcats that year had won 17 games and lost only five. Otoe had played the first game in the district tournament, but lost unexpectedly, ending Ron's prep basketball career.

It had been an impressive four years and he had ranked fourth in scoring for Nebraska high school players with a total of 1925 points.

Being such a high scorer won him other bests and mosts, but the Wildcats never won a county, district, or regional tournament in the years he played. At the time of his graduation in 1954, Ron had become the basketball hero of Otoe and Victory Hall, and he went on to play ball at Peru State in nearby Peru, Nebraska.

So goes Otoe's history, a fertile playing ground made ready for the new young energetic coach.

## **Keeping Hopes Alive Otoe, Nebraska, September 1955**

What the new young coach heard was that Ron Witt had a brother; and he was an up and coming basketball player in his own right.

Roger Witt was Ron's younger brother by three years. Roger had been a starter since his freshman year and he had been playing well enough that Otoeites were talking about records he might break, games the Wildcats might win, and tournaments they might be in.

The year before Coach Ihrig arrived, Roger and his friend and fellow classmate, Dick Steinhoff, had led the team to a 17 and 9 regular season and a district championship as sophomores. They advanced to the finals of the regional tournament before losing.

The talk over coffee among old men with too much time on their hands was that Otoe would make it to the state championship in Lincoln this year under the direction of the new young coach. It would make Otoe just strong enough to avoid consolidation. Winning at basketball would be the rescue mission for Old Faithful.

Everyone knew that the absence of a school meant the death of their little town. And young Coach Bob was Otoe's certain hope.

## **World Series and U.S. History**

### *Otoe, Nebraska – October 1955*

It could happen! Otoe could contend for a state basketball championship within Class E. With four returning starters, one senior and three juniors, plus an up and coming talented sophomore guard, there was an excellent chance it could happen.

But Roger Witt and Dick Steinhoff would need to stay out of trouble for the next two months.

Barely had thirty days elapsed when the two boys came up truant.

It was the afternoon of September 28<sup>th</sup> when Coach Ihrig noticed empty desks in the classroom where Roger and Dick should have been.

The shenanigans of the duo were well known in town and their parents only hoped they'd stay out of trouble with the law. Minor infractions such as tipping over outhouses seemed to be part of their repertoire of pranks.

While Coach stood staring at the empty desks, a girl in class whispered to him the rumor she had heard about the boys.

After assigning some work for the students, Coach Ihrig left the building, advancing swiftly to the Village Tavern.

He found the two boys sipping Coca-Cola in a booth, their rapt attention fixed on the television and the broadcast of the 1955 World Series.

Bob knew the importance of the games this year. Jackie Robinson, the first black baseball star to play in the majors, was playing against the New York Yankees and their popular star, Mickey Mantle.

Roger and Dick, and other students, held a curiosity about the black athlete and wanted to observe history in the making, but the local tavern wasn't where they should be, so Coach offered the boys and any other student an afternoon in front of the television set at his home.

Coach went home with fourteen high schoolers to watch the World Series. Only five stayed back at school. Maisy was ordered to provide snacks and drinks for the students perched on the floor in front of the small black and white set.

The favorite team that year was the Brooklyn Dodgers. The favorite player was Jackie Robinson. The favorite teacher was Mr. Ihrig. Brooklyn won the World Series and Bob won the approval of the students who learned about race relations in the United States that fall.

## **Fall Recess**

### *Otoe, Nebraska – Fall 1955*

When it came to preparation for winter boys basketball and girls volleyball, there was none.

No conditioning, no fall sports. Nothing.

Coach Ihrig thought about it, and concocted a scheme to involve both the boys and girls.

It became another reason why Mr. Ihrig would be remembered by the students he sought to influence.

Daily recess would be devoted to flag football with participation by both boys and girls. Every day new captains and new teams would be chosen and Coach himself would join the games.

Coach Bob observed the players up close and made mental notes about coordination, speed, stamina, and desire. As a group, the girls were much more aggressive, but perhaps the boys held back because they were playing with girls.

Bottom line: conditioning was taking place. Surely the purpose for the organized play had been served.

After a short game of flag football, the stop watch came out, and Coached timed the students scrambling up and down the old metal fire escape at the side of the school house. The kids had always been warned against climbing on the ancient tubular contraption. It was the first time an adult urged them to scale it. Up to the second floor then back down in seconds.

Coach's watch pitted and pushed one against the other.

## **Basketball Practice – Day One** *Otoe, Nebraska – Early November 1955*

The stopwatch and the fire escape hinted at the fast approaching basketball season.

If students thought the smiling, joking, and caring teacher was the same easy-going person who would be their coach, they were dead wrong.

At team roll call, the teacher who everyone thought was soft laid down the law and threw up a challenge: "I'm Coach Ihrig. I am your new basketball Coach. You'll do as I say. If anyone thinks he can whip me, step right up and I'll meet you down on the gym floor."

No one uttered a sound and no one made a move.

Bob gave the student manager his orders. Put a folding chair in each of the four corners of the basketball court. Turn on the scoreboard and be ready for what's next.

Bob gave the players their orders. Run, run, run. Run the perimeter. Don't cut corners. Run, run, run. Don't stop. Keep running.

Count the laps. The student manager recorded the laps around the gym on the scoreboard.

By the time the scoreboard clicked 100, most of the boys were trotting, others were walking, some were stumbling.

“If you think I’m a softie, think again. I’m going to work you sissies silly.”

## **One Hundred Percent** *Otoe, Nebraska – Early November 1955*

Day following day, the scoreboard ticked off the laps. With each go round, muscles grew and bodies endured.

Soon the boys were running the length of the court with arms in the air. They pivoted around and took on the perimeter backward or forward and sometimes on tiptoes.

Run, run, run. Push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups, chin-ups. Jumping jacks, windmills, lunges, and planks.

Planks were torture disguised as core strength training. While the players positioned themselves on the gym floor, Coach Ihrig stepped on backs or stomachs.

After a week of conditioning, Coach turned their attention to the basketball fundamentals. Dribbling, passing, shooting. And always run, run, run.

“Mama’s boys!” Coach scoffed.

“Gutless!” He sneered.

“Pussycats,” Coach snickered.

“Sissies!” He heckled.

Make a mistake and Coach Ihrig’s clipboard went flying. Don’t even think you can make a half-hearted effort.

Rebounding, blocking, jumping. If the jump wasn’t high enough, Coach kicked the boy in the butt.

Tip-offs. Control the tip.

Throw the ball. Stay in-bounds, even when pressured.

Practice free throws. Practice makes perfect.

In his cache pants and t-shirt, Coach directed practice. He yelled, he laughed, he played.  
One hundred percent. Nothing less.

## **Five Rules – Five Rewards** *Otoe, Nebraska – Early November 1955*



*Coach Ihrig in his silk tie with a proud “O”*

Coach Ihrig had given the imminent game full consideration and sat down at his typewriter.

One mimeographed sheet was all it took and he passed the pages out to the boys a week before the first game.

Rule #1 – A 9:00 p.m. curfew during the week would be enforced.

Games were scheduled on Tuesdays and Fridays. What with practice and chores at home and homework, there was no time to be out carousing the town during the week. The boys should be home in bed, and Coach intended to patrol the streets to make sure that was happening. He cruised Main and around every night until he was satisfied with the boys’ compliance.

Rule #2 – No water. Neither at practice, nor at games. No water.

Several leading coaches of the day held to the belief that water during competition only slowed an athlete down. So Coach brought a bucket of quartered lemons, and the boys sucked on them hopelessly when thirst came upon them.

Rule #3 – For every corner cut, a player must run an extra 25 laps.

It was downright inconsiderate for a player to make others wait for him. Teachers, parents, and townsfolk drove players to away games since there were no buses. If a boy made the driver wait on him, it was just plain rude. Therefore, Coach laid down the next command.

Rule #4 – If a player missed his ride home, he would run an extra 300 laps.

Forty-five minutes after a game, the boys were to be ready and waiting at the cars for the caravan home.

Rule #5 – If a player missed a free throw in a game, he will donate 5¢ to the kitty.

Excellence. Expectations.

Rewards. Recognition.

Reward #1 – New uniforms. Otoe Wildcats blue and white.

Reward #2 – New away-game uniforms. White and blue.

Reward #3 – New blue and white warm-up jackets.

Lawlor's Sporting Goods in Lincoln had taken the orders from Coach Ihrig. They had been delivered as promised. It felt good to be dressed up in anticipation of success.

Reward #4 – A blue and white silk tie with the letter "O" would be rewarded to all lettering players.

Coach Ihrig was already wearing his tie. The "O" for Otoe was to be a symbol of pride in the hometown the boys represented.

Reward #5 – All lettermen would be inducted into the "O" Club and attend the annual banquet.

Rule infractions were rare and occasionally a boy was out with a girl past nine. But receiving a stern warning from Coach brought the desired result and soon everyone was following the rules.

If they wanted to win, the players must completely obey. And for the most part, they certainly did.

## **First Six** *Otoe, Nebraska – Mid November 1955*



*Harold Kastens, Roger Fey, Duane Hillman, Roger Will, Dick Steinhoff, Jerry Gorton, Coach Bob Ihrig*

The year before Bob arrived in Otoe, the basketball varsity squad starters consisted of four sophomores and a freshman. They missed going to the Nebraska State Basketball Championship in Class E by a single point.

Now those five were a year older, had more experience, and had a new coach.

Roger Witt at 6'0" played center and was naturally the team leader because of his cool, calm demeanor under pressure. He had been the top scorer and could out-jump players two or three inches taller than he. Rebounding had made him the star of the team.

Dick Steinhoff was the second highest in scoring and played forward. He and Roger seemed to play as a harmonious pair, one reacting to the other, back and forth on the basketball court, and off the court as friends.

Dick was a comedian and a dancer; and surprisingly, had competed in dance contests. In entertaining his teammates, he kept the sometimes tense climate light.

Jerry Gorton was the only sophomore on this year's varsity squad, the rest were juniors. From his guard position he was a great shooter, and his younger brother, Jon, was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and was on the junior varsity squad.

Jerry and Jon lived across the street from Victory Hall. Most evenings after supper they snuck into the gymnasium to play ball.

When Coach Ihrig found out about the boys' clandestine practice sessions, he left one of the windows open a crack. Better in the gym than on the street.

Duane Hillman was the other forward. Roger Fey was the second guard. And senior Harold Kastens rounded out the first six.

Looking at the team's history, Coach Ihrig anticipated nothing but greatness.

## **Pep Club Mascot**

*Otoe, Nebraska – Mid November 1955*



*Front Row: L to R - Harriet Kastens, Cheerleader, Pammy Sue Ihrig, Mascot, Phyllis Hillman, Cheerleader  
Back Row: L to R - Janet Hillman, Lavona Peoples, Janet Tyson, Bonnie Peoples, Delores Welniak, Naoma Strayer, Colleen Kastens*

Bob earned \$375.00 a month. It simply was not enough for their growing family and his own spending habits. Bob wanted a nice car and fancy clothes and other luxuries that \$375.00 a month wouldn't cover.

Maisy cooked and cleaned and cared for their children. On game days, she prepared a big breakfast and while Bob consumed it, she dampened, and starched, and ironed the clothes he wanted to wear.

But those chores didn't bring in any money, so Maisy took a job working the night shift in the green bean department at a local cannery. Graveyard work meant no babysitter and she could add something to the meager \$375.00 a month.

Her job also meant she wouldn't have to go to the basketball games and that suited her just fine. She didn't want to go. She would rather work the tiresome factory grind than be the cheerful coach's wife on the sideline.

The way things turned out, Pammy Sue became the Pep Club mascot. She was in kindergarten and as Coach's daughter, who else was most likely to fill the role of good luck charm for the team?

She attended cheerleader practice and on game nights performed on the sidelines wearing royal blue and pure white, just like the big girls.

Pammy Sue went to every game, home and away. Maisy could stay home with the other two while Bob and his mascot were away.

## **Village Tavern**

*Otoe, Nebraska – Mid November 1955*

Coach Ihrig was always testing new ways to motivate the players.

Bob knew that growing boys loved to eat. Why not use food as an added incentive for winning?

Dick's Place downtown catered to a younger clientele, and Bob rushed in, eager to share his scheme with the owner. But when Coach suggested that the bar provide a free meal for the players if they won a home game, Dick shot the idea down.

"I'm not in business to give away free food. I'm in business to make money." Dick had no faith that basketball players eating at his place would draw enough extra customers to offset the cost of the food. So Dick wished the new coach success, and sent him on his way.

With barely a second's hesitation, Bob stepped next door to the Village Tavern. He'd make the same request of the older man who owned the tavern and would hope for a better response.

Mr. Henry had a keen sense of business and knew what it took to make things work. He and his family lived in the basement of the Village Tavern, and they had made sacrifices for their success.

But he faltered when Coach mentioned chili soup. He didn't know how to make it, and Bob wanted his favorite soup to be part of the after game celebration.

Hamburgers. Chili. Coke. That's all, and Maisy would stew up the first batch and give Mr. Henry the recipe.

It was all set. After their first home game win, the boys would meet at the Village Tavern and be treated to a free meal. Invite friends. Invite family. Celebrate a basketball win.

The Village Tavern and Mr. Henry would be winners, too.

## **Season Opener** *Otoe, Nebraska – Late November 1955*

Friday couldn't come quick enough for Bob and the boys.

Old men drank coffee and pondered the points Otoe would score over Douglas.

Otoe, Class E in schools, had always been the doormat of Otoe County. Otoe, the underdogs, had risen in rank over the past few years. Otoe, the Wildcats, should have no problem beating Douglas.

The cost of admission into Victory Hall had increased. Coach Ihrig raised the price by a dime and a mere quarter would give the Otoe fans a night's entertainment.

Every seat in the bleachers filled up. The pep club occupied a corner rectangle of space near the players' sideline. Every member wore royal blue and white. The cheerleaders and mascot Pammy Sue milled around on the floor in front of the club, fidgeting before the first tip-off.

The hometown boys warmed up on half the court until Coach called them to the locker room where he delivered a rousing speech meant to help them play their best.

But the Wildcats were out of sync, clumsy, out of step. Coach Ihrig shouted to the boys from the sidelines but nothing seemed to pull them out of their funk.

Still and all, the Wildcats won 55 to 53, and they hurried off to the Village Tavern to devour their reward.

## **Regrets**

### ***Otoe, Nebraska – Late November 1955***

Dick from Dick's Place came before Coach Ihrig on Monday afternoon and with a contrite spirit, apologized to Bob. He had made a poor decision about offering the boys a free meal. He had been wrong.

On Friday after the game, Bob had peeked in at Dick's Place. Two old codgers at the rail had been his only customers.

Dick wondered if Coach would consider sending the team to his bar every other week, but Bob had given Mr. Henry his word. They had a deal and he would not renege. Besides, going to a different place and switching off was too confusing.

Dick left Coach's office and in parting asked if next year he would be given another opportunity to be the host.

Dick had regrets. There was no doubt about it.

Bob had regrets, too. It had been an ugly first win.

Back to the gym. Back to running. Back to free throw shots. Back to practice.

## **Scouting Reports**

### *Otoe, Nebraska – Early December 1955*

There was a science to all of this. Coach Ihrig devised a plan to systematically calculate each individual's performance. Once he tallied up each player's grade he could determine who should get the most playing time.

Winning at basketball involved the team, the coach, and some ready and able-bodied volunteers.

Bob recruited a couple of local men to scout the upcoming opponents. Maybe it was a type of spying, but it truly was a matter of preparation.

The scouts brought back reports on Murdock, Avoca, St. Bernard's, and Dunbar. Methodically, game plans were laid out. Practices became even more intensely productive. There was a science to all of this.

And so it went.

Game 2: Otoe 60 – Murdock 51

Game 3: Otoe 63 – Avoca 44

Game 4: Otoe 81 – St. Bernard's 36

Game 5: Otoe 59 – Dunbar 46

Just like that the team was 5 – 0

## **The Syracuse Rockets** *Syracuse, Nebraska – Mid December 1955*

A handful of locals began checking into the cost of hotel rooms in Lincoln for the State Basketball Tournament.

But hold up here! Syracuse was next on the schedule.

Just eight miles separated Syracuse and Otoe. Unfortunately, the distance wasn't greater. Sometimes neighbors don't get along, and that was the case here.

Syracuse was Class C. Otoe was E. It was unequal from the start. The Otoe Wildcats had beaten the Syracuse Rockets just once in thirty years.

The game was on the schedule, and there was nothing to do but try to win and not lose face.

The huge gymnasium at Syracuse held 500 fans, and Otoe did their best to show up en masse to support their own.

It must have helped because it was a close game from the opening whistle. But as Coach Ihrig saw it, there were several questionable calls; and more than once, he challenged the referees, and that did not serve Otoe well.

The final was 46 to 41 with Syracuse the winner as they expected. How dare the boys from Otoe to come into town and presume to win over Syracuse! They were silly to think their little Germany could ever beat the Rockets.

Sulking and silent, the boys rode quickly home forgetting already that it had been so close.

## **Christmas Break**

### *Otoe, Nebraska – Late December 1955*

“Look ahead boys,” Coach Ihrig encouraged the team.

Sixth win over Palmyra – 47 to 38.

Seventh win over Unadilla – 48 to 41.

The loss to Syracuse still stung, but it was Christmas and time for celebration and a coming together of family.

Bob’s sister June and her husband had recently moved to Holdrege where Bud had been assigned a new territory by Debus Bread.

They came to Otoe for Christmas and brought the children, Scott and Dixie, who couldn’t wait to see their cousins.

Sunday afternoons, some able-bodied men and Bob played a pick-up game of basketball in Victory Hall. They even had a scoreboard operator, so these games were serious fun.

Since it was the holiday, some alumni and Bud joined the game. Even Ron Witt showed up and played awhile. He had been at the Unadilla game and was surely impressed.

Because Bob was so aggressively athletic, everyone presumed that Coach had been a high school and college basketball star. And he never denied or corrected the rumors.

But Bud noticed Bob struggling to breathe after a period of plays and a sprint down the length of the gym. He wondered to himself what was wrong with his talented brother-in-law.

June had never told her husband about Bob’s heart and all those months in bed, and in a hospital. She knew her brother wouldn’t want it found out.

## **Nebraska City News-Press** *Nebraska City, Nebraska – Late December 1955*

Coach Ihrig subscribed to the *Nebraska City News-Press*. It was important to keep abreast of the area pulse. Nebraska City, after all, was the county seat of Otoe County, and as the largest town, it held a population of a bit more than seven thousand people.

It had been the first incorporated town in what was then the Nebraska Territory, and the *Nebraska City News-Press* had been established in 1854, more than a decade before Nebraska became a state.

The newspaper's founder and owner was J. Sterling Morton, a staunchly active Bourbon Democrat, who became an early territorial governor, and later the Secretary of Agriculture under President Grover Cleveland.

Morton's home in Nebraska City was loftily built in a stunning likeness of the nation's White House, surrounding which were planted acres and acres of various varieties of apple trees.

One thing preceded another, and later in his life J. Sterling Morton's work with trees led to the adoption of Arbor Day, a national holiday observed the last Friday every April, a day to plant a tree. Arbor Day is J. Sterling's most significant life contribution.

Events at the Morton estate were covered generously in the *Nebraska City News-Press* and the sports page focused on the local high school, the Nebraska City Pioneers.

Bob understood that the Pioneers competed in Class A and the school was naturally the largest one in the county, but couldn't the sports writer include some news about Otoe, especially in light of how well the Wildcats were playing?

## **Jack Andersen Sports Editor**

### ***Nebraska City, Nebraska – Late December 1955***

Gathering an arsenal of diplomacy, Bob went south to meet with the spirited sport editor for the *Nebraska City News-Press* – Jack Andersen.

First, Coach Ihrig extolled the career of Ron Witt. How he was the fifth leading scorer in Nebraska high school basketball history. How only four other players in the State had scored more points than Ron. How even with Otoe never having won a county or district tournament with the advantage of extra games played, he still ranked in the top five.

And, more to the point, Ron had a brother. Otoe had another current Witt. Roger was carrying forward a family tradition; and equally important, making Otoe basketball strong.

The sports editor hadn't paid attention to Otoe's appearance in the regional finals last year. He didn't know the starting five were back. He didn't know they were having another great year. The Otoe Wildcats had been ignored outside of their own little town.

Bob wanted the entire State to know about his basketball team, or at least the people in the county.

He had made his case, proved his points; and at the very least, Jack Andersen promised to step inside Victory Hall at the next opportunity.

There'd be a burger and a cold beer waiting for him at the Village Tavern after the game.

## **Hitting Stride**

### ***Otoe, Nebraska – Early January 1956***

A coach wishes the Christmas holiday won't take away his team's spirit to play their best basketball; or worst still, the boys return out of shape. Coach Ihrig hoped his team wouldn't fall apart after the New Year.

But Bob need not have worried.

The first game of 1956 was a repeat of an earlier game with Avoca. Otoe beat them soundly and worse than the first time around.

Final: Otoe 85 – Avoca 37.

Game 10: Otoe 68 – Talmage 38

Game 11: Otoe 81 – Waterloo 62

Game 12: Otoe 71 – Douglas 61

Game 13: Otoe 47 – Union 39

Roger Witt was averaging 31 points a game with 14 rebounds. Dick Stenihoff's point average was 18 and Jerry Gorton's was 14.

With those kinds of averages, it's not hard to see why other teams began to dread playing the Wildcats.

A 12 and 1 record and Bob's boys were hitting stride.

## **Jack Andersen's Visit** *Otoe, Nebraska – Late January 1956*

Fifteen miles to the north and east of Otoe stood Nehawka, a tiny town of 250 people in neighboring Cass County.

The Nehawkans were coming to Otoe on Friday night and the Wildcats were getting ready.

When Coach Ihrig got a call midway into the week from Jack Andersen pronouncing his upcoming visit to Victory Hall, the pressure was on. Andersen had told Coach he hoped for a good showing, the foundation for an interesting article.

Bob spread the news at practice and urged the players to tell their family and friends. The anticipation broadcasted through Otoe like the hot topic that it was.

The night of the game, Victory Hall was filled to capacity and beyond. A couple dozen folks milled around outside, hoping for admission into the event if someone left early. Two front row seats were reserved for Jack Andersen and a guest.

That night, the Wildcats had an audience. That night, the Wildcats beamed. Were the boys showing off? So it seemed.

That night, the Village Tavern was filled to capacity and beyond. A couple dozen basketball fans milled around outside, hoping to get inside before all the celebrities left.

Coach Bob and Sports Editor Jack carried on their business of post-game interview with constant interruptions from players and fans and tavern staff. It was a light-hearted conversation, positive and full of praise.

As Jack made ready to leave, he hesitated, then sat back down and leaned over the table so that Bob could hear his whisper.

“You know, Coach. You’ve been accused of running up the score on some of these teams. I’ve heard complaints from other coaches. But I just wanted you to know, I didn’t see that here tonight.”

Jack leaned back and was gone.

## **Running Up the Score** *Otoe, Nebraska – Late January 1956*

Bob was ecstatic when he found the article in the next issue of the *Nebraska City News-Press*. At last, a glowing account of his deserving team.

Snipping carefully around the narrow columns, he clipped out the write-up and posted it on the school bulletin board.

**Otoe clobbers Nehawka 85-22**  
By Jack Andersen  
Sports Editor – *Nebraska City News-Press*

Coach Bob Ihrig's Otoe basketeers probably decided that games are won by performance on the court and not in newspapers as they get back into their high scoring routine Friday night to clobber Nehawka 85-22.

That the Wildcats were out to make up their showing against Union when the Royal Blue and White scored but two points in the first quarter while the opposition was making 11.

Friday night Ihrig's boys didn't waste any time, scoring 21 points in the first quarter while holding Nehawka to only six. The Cass countians went scoreless in the second quarter as the Wildcats went on to register 20 points leading at intermission 41-6.

Despite the fact that Ihrig played his two high scorers, Witt and Steinhoff, but half the game, the determined Otoe five rolled up the big score to show their rooters that they were still the high scoring five that has lost but one game this season and won 13. Jerry Gorton was high scorer with 24 points made on 11 two pointers and two out of four foul conversions.

For Nehawka, hampered this season by lack of height, Ned Snyder was high hoopster with 16 points. It was an exceptionally cleanly played game with but 12 personals being called on both teams combined.

Ihrig can look forward to an exceptionally good record next year, only Harold Kastens being lost by graduation.

<b>Otoe (85)</b>					
		<b>fg</b>	<b>ft</b>	<b>pf</b>	<b>tp</b>
H. Kastens	5	0-0	2	10	
Sporhase	0	0-0	0	0	
Steinhoff	5	1-4	1	11	
E. Meyer	1	2-2	0	4	
Witt	6	0-0	0	12	
Ross	2	0-0	0	4	
Fey	2	0-1	2	4	
Gorton	11	2-4	0	24	
Hillman	7	0-0	0	14	
M. Kastens	1	0-0	0	2	
Totals	40	5-11	5	85	

<b>Nehawka (22)</b>					
		<b>fg</b>	<b>ft</b>	<b>pf</b>	<b>tp</b>
T. Snyder	0	0-0	1	0	
N. Snyder	7	2-2	1	16	
Jones	0	2-2	1	2	
Nixon	1	0-1	3	2	
Moors	0	0-2	1	2	
Totals	8	4-7	7	22	

As Bob passed through the hall at the end of the school day, he paused and read the piece for the umpteenth time.

Mr. Andersen's gossip about running up the score was on replay in Bob's head. Clearly, the other coaches were not paying attention that midway through the third quarter or the last half of the fourth quarter, he was using the third team made up of some eighth and ninth graders.

Running up the score he was not doing. But maybe; maybe he should.

## **Otoe County Tournament** *Syracuse, Nebraska – Late January 1956*

In the deep dead of winter, eastern Nebraskans needed a reason to play more basketball. It kept the blood flowing and the days moving forward.

The towns of Burr, Douglas, Dunbar, Otoe, Palmyra, St. Bernard, Syracuse, Talmage, and Unadilla all participated in the Otoe County Tournament. Only Nebraska City held back, respecting that their size gave them an unfair advantage over the smaller schools.

Syracuse was iffy. They most definitely had fewer students than Nebraska City, but they were a larger Class C school; and as such, they were powerful. But they hosted the tournament, so they remained as competitors, even though some folks thought it was not right.

The Wildcats had never won the county tournament, but this year would be different. Hopes soared high. Optimism prevailed.

But at the very first game against the Dunbar Wolves, who they had handily beaten earlier in the year, the boys looked sluggish and out of sync. Mistakes and fumbling and bad execution, until Coach Ihrig exploded and sent all five starters to the bench.

For the rest of the quarter, the five watched their own second team hold their own against Dunbar.

“Are you ready to play now?” asked Coach of his sorry first five at the close of the quarter.

The starters were more than ready. The boys finished with a 60 to 36 win over Dunbar.

## **Wildcats vs. Rockets** *Syracuse, Nebraska – Late January 1956*

A 73 to 59 win over Palmyra in the semi-finals gave the Wildcats a spot against their nemesis in the final game of the tournament.

The Syracuse Rockets had two tall towering advantages: home court placement and strength of population. Syracuse was five times larger than Otoe.

When Syracuse and Otoe had met earlier in the year, it had been a nip and tuck match-up. A re-match was fodder for a stimulating sports story.

Without giving a specific prediction, Jack Andersen prophesied a close game between the Rockets and the Wildcats in the Otoe County Tournament finals. At last, the little school in Otoe was getting some print space in the *Nebraska City News-Press*.

It was a packed house at 7:00 pm game time. Seventy-five cents adult admission and 35¢ a ticket for students was the fee at the door and the school at Syracuse banked the till.

As the game neared the end, the Rocket pep band blared. The standing crowd screamed. And the scoreboard read 47 and 46 with the Wildcats on top. Surely Otoe could pull this off, but in the last seconds, a desperate shot from Syracuse made its mark and the Rockets somehow, somehow pushed this over and came out with a 48 to 47 win.

The sports reporter forced himself through the mob and got close enough to Coach Ihrig to scoop up a response about referee calls favoring Syracuse in the last seconds of the game.

Bob recognized Jack Andersen's ploy to get him to say something that was not in his team's best interest. "No comment!" And Coach rushed to the locker room.

## **Wildcat Girls Volleyball** *Otoe, Nebraska – Mid February 1956*

It was a good thing there was girls volleyball. It kept the blood flowing and the days moving forward.

For Coach Ihrig, there were three practices a day: girls volleyball, junior varsity basketball, varsity basketball.

Coaching the girls was like an oasis in a desert of competition.



*Front Row (L to R) Carla Johnson, Phyllis Hillman, Janis Seybert, Lavona Peoples, Janet Hillman, Naoma Strayer  
Back Row (L to R) Janet Tyson, Delores Welniak, Bonnie Peoples, Harriet Kastens, Colleen Kastens, Coach Bob Ihrig*

On game nights the girls played volleyball at four or five. Junior varsity came on next and varsity basketball followed at 8:00 pm.

After volleyball, the girls became the pep club and donned their royal blue and white.

Girls weren't expected to be as competitive as the boys. It was just how things were. They only ran 25 laps at practice, and if the season ended at 9 and 10, it was okay. Next year there would be returning letterwomen, so Coach knew they would be improved. It just wasn't top priority.

Victory at the Otoe County Volleyball Tournament and the Peru Invitational eluded the girls and they went home with losses in the opening matches, though proud to have competed.

Volleyball was fun. The girls were energetic. Coach Bob was happy to be with the young ladies and glad to have found an eager audience for his jokes and speeches and constant friendly bantering.

And Coach didn't mind being the object of many a young girl's high school crush. It was just how things were.

## **Final Five Games**

### *Otoe, Nebraska – Mid February 1956*

It was a good thing there were five more opportunities to compete at basketball this season; otherwise, Coach Ihrig would have been absorbed in the loss to Syracuse for months.

That was the benefit about regulated sports – schedules always pushed a team forward into another contest.

Bob was determined and resolute. The boys were piqued. But at least there were five more chances this season to prove their worth.

Game 18: Otoe 75 – Cook 43

Game 19: Otoe 119 – St. Bernard's 42

Game 20: Otoe 91 – Walton 38

Game 21: Otoe 99 – Burr 18

Game 22: Otoe 64 – Elmwood 56

To even a casual observer, it looked like running up the score. But Coach Ihrig had played second and third strings, so it could be said that Otoe was just plain excellent this year. And Jack Andersen put it down in the record – a 20 and 2 regular season.

## **Boys District Basketball Tournament**

### *Bellevue, Nebraska – Late February 1956*

That 20 and 2 gave Otoe a high seat in the boys district tournament.

So in late February, Otoe faced Irvington, a small village in Douglas County, northwest of Omaha. The boys stuck to Coach Ihrig's plan and drew on their strict conditioning and came home with a 74 to 45 victory.

In the tournament second round, they played the Murdock Tigers, a familiar foe from Cass County, and brought home another win, 60 to 46.

Greenwood stood against Otoe in the finals, but Otoe won the game at 67 to 43, and earned the district trophy for the second year in a row.

The townspeople of Otoe were dreaming of advancing to the state basketball tournament and winning it all. If the boys succeeded, who knew? It might save the school. Other young families might move to Otoe. Other schools might want to merge with Otoe.

With so much riding on winning, pressures mounted; and for Bob, he kept trying to focus on the game itself. Otherwise, paranoia and superstitions might take an upper hand.

## **Regional Playoffs**

### *Peru, Nebraska – Early March 1956*



*Peru State College Gymnasium called "The Chapel"*

Six divisions according to the size of the high school from Class AA to Class E are made in Nebraska. Four regional playoffs for each class separate the competition in basketball and pave the way to the ultimate goal of being invited to the state basketball tournament in Lincoln.

Class E district winners in the southeast part of the State advanced to the regionals in Peru, Nebraska. There at Peru State College the competitors had the chance to play ball in "The Chapel."

It was an impressive and symmetrically appealing edifice on the college campus, a landmark of the university which had been founded by the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1865,

making it the first and oldest institution of higher education in the territory, two years before Nebraska entered statehood.

There was a gym in the basement of the building built in 1905; but in 1922, the chapel was remodeled to become a full-time gymnasium on the main floor where the surrounding seating capacity maxed out at a thousand.

The place was intimidating to a small Class E school. Noisy spectators and flashing cameras laid a load of pressure on the young men from Otoe.

Yet against the Firth Wildcats in the first game they came out the winners at 67 – 50, with Roger Witt, the leading scorer.

Sprague-Martell Central Panthers, a consolidated school in Lancaster County, lined up against Otoe in the final game at regionals, and came up the victors in a close contest, 61 to 59. Otoe went home and Sprague-Martell went to Lincoln to compete for a state championship.

That was it. It ended the Wildcats' season. Done!

## **Taking Stock** *Otoe, Nebraska – Mid March 1956*

Bob had been moving forward so quickly that when the season so abruptly came to an end, he was unprepared for the letdown.

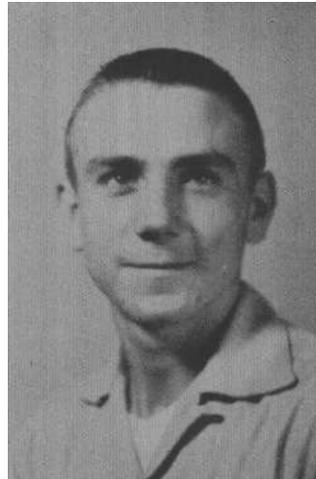
He blamed himself for the three point deficit in the final score. He should have been making the boys practice more free throws.

But if he summarized the season in its entirety, how could he not be pleased? The Otoe Wildcats had just come off the best record in school history at 24 and 3. The boys had also set a new record for most points scored in a season.

Bob kept tabs on Venango and Alvo and Yutan. And his Otoe Wildcats had done better than those schools and the teams he had left behind.

In taking stock, Coach knew it had been a good year. The town of Otoe had championed the team, adding a foundation of community which can't be measured, but had become part of basketball success.

**All-Stater Roger Witt**  
*Otoe, Nebraska – Late March 1956*



*Junior Roger Witt*

Jack Andersen's coverage of Otoe basketball in the *Nebraska City News-Press* must have gotten the attention of those who decide on the yearly All-State team, because Roger Witt as center and high scorer was named to the Class E All-State Team. No other player in Otoe had ever been elected. Even his high-scoring brother Ron had been overlooked.

In the five games of the district and regional playoffs, Roger had set a new state record in Class E for most points scored.

At an average of 33 points a game, the sixteen year old junior had racked up 163 points along with 15 rebounds per game.

For little-known Otoe, Roger Witt's accomplishments were a big deal. And Coach Ihrig kept envisioning next year.

## **Fitting In and Falling Short** *Otoe, Nebraska – Early April 1956*

Bob's desire to socialize within the surrounds of Otoe began to erode on the time he had promised to Maisy on Saturdays. Instead of driving to Omaha, the popular superintendent accepted invitation after invitation to house parties in Otoe, gatherings of young couples for dinner and drinks and cards.

The game of pitch kept the participants involved until two or three in the morning, and that was A-okay with Bob. He never wanted the nights to end. Flirtations from other women and reciprocated from Bob did not sit well with Maisy who talked too much and drank even more. When nights out were over, arguments at home began. Anyone could see that Maisy was only trying to fit in.

Bob always ended at the upper hand. He was the imperious college-educated bread winner, and Maisy hadn't even finished high school. Alcohol seemed to be an easy fix; at least it made socializing easier for her. Bob liked to be in control and he wanted Maisy to look and act a certain way; and to him, she was falling far short of his mark.

When there was no house party on the weekend, they traveled to Syracuse for an evening at Elm's Ballroom, where big bands played and couples danced and drank. Bob liked to be noticed and women who knew him asked him to dance. Elm's allowed minors and high school girls thought it was great fun to dance with their popular and handsome teacher.

That left Maisy sulking at a table alone, sipping whiskey and trying not to look uncomfortable, though that's exactly how she felt.

Sunday mornings arrived too soon for the mother whose job it was to take children to Sunday School. Time for Pammie Sue and Bobby Mark to be baptized. Time to cook breakfast and feed the baby. Time to get clothes cleaned and starched for Bob's week.

Time for Bob to sleep.

## **Sock Hops**

### *Otoe, Nebraska – Mid April 1956*

Otoe was situated strategically between Omaha to the east and Lincoln to the west. Otoe kids could listen to KFAB out of Omaha or KOLN out of Lincoln. And when the sun went down, KOMA's 50,000 watts out of Oklahoma City sent its signal out across the sky carrying the current rock 'n roll hits to young people on old car radios around the surrounding country.

Music classes in school were a close second favorite to sports, and in some cases outshone sports in popularity. It was the same for Mr. Ihrig; and as superintendent, he had directed the music teacher to organize a small instrumental group with violin, trombone, coronet, clarinet, and French horn.

There was a choir and a boys and girls glee club and theater, where junior students performed the comedy "Take It Easy."

A well-rounded curriculum was what the parents hoped the five teachers at Otoe High could achieve. Yet no group of 1950s teens would be happy without the thrill of dance.

A record player. 45s. Kids with no shoes at Victory Hall. And the superintendent chaperone.

For no reason they danced. For joy of music they danced. For youth and rhythm they danced. It was all the rage across the country.

When "Heartbreak Hotel" became the #1 hit on the Billboard Chart, Elvis Presley became the new teen idol and his record became the number one request at every future sock hop inside Victory Hall.

Then from Lincoln came the news of a dance contest. *Johnny Jay's Bandstand* came live out of Nebraska's capital city and aired competing high schoolers vying for the honor and prize

of dancing king and queen. Winning the competition meant an all expense trip to Chicago to contend for the national dance contest.

Foiled by a spring snow storm, sophomore Bonnie Peoples and junior Hank Kirchhoff from Otoe never made the trip. But the dancing never stopped.

## **Basketball Banquet** *Otoe, Nebraska – Late April 1956*



*Front Row (L to R): Hank Kirchhoff, Jerry Gorton, Roger Witt, Dick Steinhoff, Harold Kastens, Norman Meyer  
Back Row (L to R): Asst. Coach Gawart, Ervin Meyer, Duane Hillman, Richard Koch, Roger Fey, Coach Bob Ihrig*

Spring arrived in eastern Nebraska, yet Otoe was still celebrating basketball. The annual recognition banquet would finally put the season to rest.

Two hundred townsfolk paid for a home cooked meal, prepared by some high school mothers, and served by the pep club in Victory Hall.

After dinner, the program began with opening remarks from a man who seldom spoke under such circumstances as this – Assistant Coach Carl Gawart.

Coach Ihrig took center stage then and comfortably delivered a speech glorifying the basketball team he was so proud of. To give full recognition to each boy, Coach presented the promised silk tie decorated with an “O.” As Coach called the name of each player, he listed his abilities and joked about some anecdote that made the boy seem remarkable.

Coach Ihrig saved the last tie for Roger Witt, and made a glowing summary of the young man's achievements. Everyone in Otoe knew that Roger had been awarded a presence on the All-State Team, so it was only fitting to also award him with a standing ovation.

When the people settled back into their seats, the keynote speaker took to the podium, pouring out more praises to the team. Jack Andersen from the *Nebraska City News-Press* delivered a generous tribute to officially end the basketball campaign of 1955-56 and pulled the audience to their feet for a second standing ovation.

Then it was over. The season. The celebration. The satisfaction.

But wait. One more drink at Mr. Henry's tavern to toast the time.

## **Donkeys and Girls**

### *Otoe, Nebraska – Early May 1956*

The basketball banquet had been a successful money maker, but it wasn't enough.

Desperately, the superintendent tried to think of things that would bring in revenue. The school budget was in serious trouble.

Donkey basketball! That was it! That would surely be a money maker and everyone would come and pay admission.

Coach Bob organized the whole event which drew a paying crowd into Victory Hall to witness players playing basketball on stubborn beasts of burden. A mess they made, the jackasses did, but it created a hilariously good time.

With money from the admission and concessions, it was a considerable take. But it wasn't enough.

Next came basketball played between basketball boys and volleyball girls – five boys against ten girls. With game rules changed to supposedly make the contest more fair, the battle of the sexes began.

The referees seldom blew their whistles when the girls traveled or double dribbled. And they stood by and chuckled when the girls piled on top of the boys.

In spite of all the fun and the funds these events brought in, it still wasn't enough.

## **Sneak Day** *Otoe, Nebraska – Mid May 1956*



*1956 Senior Class of Otoe High*

Eventually, many small schools would consolidate, leaving the towns without that lifeblood which kept their communities strong; but for now, there was track and baseball to carry high school athletes into the close of the school year.

The graduation festivities didn't take much planning because everything was always done in the same way every year.

It was Senior Sneak Day that took planning and the planning was a good deal of the fun.

Mr. Ihrig was the senior class sponsor, so he and the five seniors schemed out the secret trip. The last week of school, the six disappeared and no one knew a thing. The class sponsor was the chaperone and driver and they pulled out of Otoe in Mr. Ihrig's Dodge Coupe one early morning in late May.

Six hundred miles they motored to Mt. Rushmore in the Black Hills of South Dakota. The trip to Rapid City took ten hours, time together reminiscing about school days and years that had passed so quickly.

By the time they checked into the rustic cozy cabins they had reserved, a snowstorm descended on the Hills, surprising the young Nebraskans who had not prepared for freezing weather in nearly summer May.

No one packed winter clothes; and consequently, the planned for activities outside were left off. The group headed home ahead of schedule, back to the warmth of hometown Otoe, back to whatever seniors do in summer.

## **Resignations and Vetoes** *Otoe, Nebraska – Summer 1956*

Seniors did what seniors do.

Bob returned to do what he did in summer – sell insurance.

Knowing everyone for miles around was a shoe-in for sales and he added what he could to the family budget.

Meanwhile, two teachers submitted resignation letters and Bob groaned with the added burden of finding replacements to come to Otoe. To him, losing the music teacher was the hardest to bear. Who would conduct choir and glee clubs, teach instruments, or direct the school plays?

Bob pleaded again with the school board for approval of football. He argued it would help prepare the boys for basketball and could serve as an attraction for families to send their sons to school in Otoe. His pleadings were the same as he had voiced the year before.

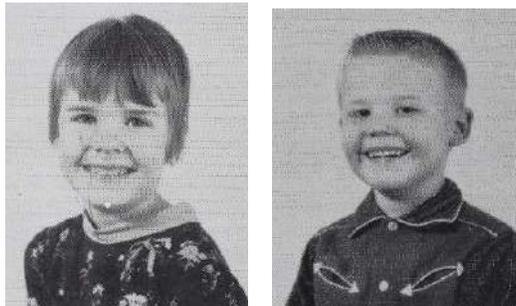
The answer was the same. No, there was no money. No, the boys might get hurt. And no, they had tried it in the past and the result was as predicted. Injuries.

So Bob asked the board if he could umpire and referee at area football games and he got approval again.

Better to keep busy and make money. And work on his master's degree at the University of Omaha.

## **Back To School**

*Otoe, Nebraska – September 1956*



*Pammy Sue and Bobby Mark*

The Nebraska Athletic Association was considering the elimination of the Class E division. Most small schools were already closing to consolidation.

If Otoe became a Class D school, perhaps more families would move there; so reasoned the school board. So they set the superintendent the task of petitioning the Association for Otoe to be transferred to Class D. Half-heartedly, Bob wrote the letter. As far as he could tell, this school was not going to last much longer.

On the home front and for the first time in his teaching career, Bob's little family would occupy their house for a second year. There was a certain comfort in that as Bob approached his twenty-eighth birthday.

At school, forty-five high school and junior high students occupied the second level of Old Faithful. Ten seniors were enrolled and thirty-eight students filled kindergarten through sixth grade.

Pammy Sue would be in first grade and Bobby Mark would enter kindergarten.

There were times in the course of kindergarten when Bobby Mark was sent up the stairs to the second floor. The superintendent's office was a dreaded place for misbehaving students.

Mr. Ihrig had a sturdy wooden paddle board, carved with the initials of his college fraternity, which he used to mete out punishment to young errant children.

The superintendent delivered a short lecture that was never really meant to be understood by the small person in front of him. But what the child did understand was that some bad deed of his had resulted in a whacking from the man in charge. He paddled the guilty party's rump three times as the child bent over and grabbed his ankles.

Thump, thump, whack! And back to his classroom he hurried.

But for Bobby Mark, he caught hell again at home. The first discipline came from the superintendent and the second from his dad.

Somehow, it just didn't seem fair.

## **Watching the World Series** *Otoe, Nebraska – October 1956*

At the doorway of Mr. Ihrig's office stood Roger Witt and Dick Steinhoff. Please could the students watch the World Series again at the superintendent's house.

The New York Yankees played the Brooklyn Dodgers in a repeat match-up of the two top baseball rivals. Students sat on the floor around the television set while Mrs. Ihrig stepped over young feet and legs delivering snacks to the hungry group.

Kim Louise sat quietly among the crowd of high schoolers while her important father, ever oblivious to his tired and pregnant wife, spoke during advertisement breaks to his attentive audience.

The 1956 presidential election was the topic for a spirited discussion. President Dwight Eisenhower was the popular incumbent Republican facing Democrat Adlai Stevenson.

Eisenhower's running mate was Richard M. Nixon, the young and handsome choice of all the young girls.

On the floor in his living room, Mr. Ihrig taught current events, and the class that day learned their lessons well.

## **Basketball Practice** *Otoe, Nebraska – Late October 1956*



*1956-'57 Otoe Wildcats Varsity Squad  
Coach Bob Ihrig, Roger Witt, Roger Ross, Dick Steinhoff, Duane Hillman, Jerry Gorton, Roger Fey,  
Junior Kirchhoff, Norman Meyer, Merlin Kastens, and Jon Gorton*

Winning. That's all the boys wanted. The same starting five would be playing together for the third straight year. They knew what Coach Ihrig expected of them. They knew the town of Otoe had high expectations. There was going to be a lot of practice, a lot of conditioning, and they were committed. But they were boys, after all. And boys wanted to play, not work. Or at least, not always work.

Winning. That's all Coach Ihrig wanted. He knew what to do. Make the boys run. Make them shoot free throws. Practice dribbles, breaks, defense, pivots, shots, and rebounding. Injuries were the big thing. Strong and sound the boys must be to win at home, away, at regionals, and state.

Nagging concerns about calcium deposits in Roger Witt's upper leg had his parents and Coach ever worried about how conditions may grow worse. There had been some internal bleeding, so Roger wore a football pad taped to his leg during practice. If he wore the pad during games, the opponents would surely guess about a weakness and target him in competition.

Do better than you think you can do. Overcome injuries. Run the perimeter of the gym and don't cut corners. Coach had his chairs in place to keep the squad running hard.

Preparation. Practice. Passion. Pride.

## **Out of the Gate Fast** *Otoe, Nebraska – Early November 1956*

Little Jon Gorton was the only little freshman to make the varsity squad. He could shoot baskets accurately in spite of his size, and because of his size, he could shift around quickly on the court.

Nonetheless, he was the youngest, and his older teammates, including his brother, were boys, after all. Among other deeds, they put muscle rub in his jock strap, and he didn't say a word.

The season was underway; and naturally, the focus aligned to games and winning.

In the locker room, Coach Ihrig simplified his strategies and spoke about percentages. Some of the talk was just nerves, so Coach stopped and directed the boys to get on their knees to pray.

Silence and calm. Then shouts and claps. Out to the court they ran.

Game 1: Otoe 93 – Murdock 19

(Roger Witt 26, Dick Steinhoff 21, Jerry Gorton 21, Roger Fey 10))

Game 2: Otoe 87 – Douglas 26

(Roger Witt 29, Dick Steinhoff 20, Jerry Gorton 17, Roger Fey 11)

Game 3: Otoe 80 – Avoca 42

(Roger Witt 37, Dick Steinhoff 9, Jerry Gorton 13, Roger Fey 13)

The *Nebraska City News-Press* ran full column articles about the Wildcats and their feats. Jack Andersen had become the Otoe basketball advocate. By game three, the *Lincoln Journal* and *Lincoln Star* put in Wildcat reports of their own.

Game 4: Otoe 88 – St. Bernard’s 25  
(Roger Witt 29, Dick Steinhoff 18, Jerry Gorton 16)

Game 5: Otoe 92 – Dunbar 29  
(Roger Witt 29, Dick Steinhoff 23, Jerry Gorton 15, Duane Hillman 14)

Game 6: Otoe 57 – Palmyra 49  
(Roger Witt 29, Dick Steinhoff 14, Jerry Gorton 10)

Game 7: Otoe 89 – Unadilla 44  
(Roger Witt 32, Dick Steinhoff 16, Jerry Gorton 27)

Game 8: Otoe 69 – Avoca 30  
(Roger Witt 26, Dick Steinhoff 18, Jerry Gorton 12)

Game 9: Otoe 103 – Douglas 21  
(Roger Witt 32, Dick Steinhoff 31, Jerry Gorton 13, Duane Hillman 17)

Nine and 0 they were. Sports writer’s darlings they had become. But Bob knew better than to rest on their laurels.

## **Holiday Break** *Otoe, Nebraska – Mid December 1956*

It was time to get out of town.

A trip to the grocer for a loaf of bread would be stalled by townsfolk discussions about basketball, games played and games yet to be played.

It was time for Bob to get away from the pressure. A demanding class schedule. School administration. Refereeing. Children at home. A grumpy pregnant wife. And basketball.

He wanted to see his mother. To show off the family. To celebrate Christmas in his hometown. To just sit still and relax. But he and Clara would never see eye to eye on his coaching.

He would invite her to come to a basketball game. She would say “never.” She would hold on to her obstinacy about his career until the day she died. She wholeheartedly believed he was not caring for his heart the way he should.

Bob was invincible and immovable and he was determined to continue coaching. To tell him he shouldn't be doing what he loved to do only made him all the more uptight.

But the very day they were to leave for McCook, Bob found himself entangled in an unexpected controversy. Something so unnerving that he canceled Christmas.

## **Rumors and Controversy** *Otoe, Nebraska – Mid December 1956*

And, Jack Andersen was responsible!

One minute he lauded praise on the Wildcats. The next he painted a villain. But whatever appeared in print was believed as gospel.

Just weeks ago, accusations from opponents of the Wildcats were heard that Otoe was running up the score. Coach Ihrig was aggressive, no doubt, but he typically pulled high scoring Roger Witt and Dick Steinhoff from the games early when victory was assured.

The *Nebraska City News-Press* had initially defended the Wildcats as Jack Andersen swayed his readership to see things from Otoe's point of view.

Coach Bob Ihrig at Otoe has a most unusual situation at Otoe this season. He can't control his Wildcats. At the time of this writing, the Wildcats have won four one-sided ball games and are averaging nearly 90 points a game.

The question is, is it wrong? Many will say an emphatic yes and many will say no. The Wildcats will no doubt have one of, if not the top, Class E teams in the state this year and the only way to get there and stay there is to win decisively.

Any coach who contends ratings mean nothing is just kidding himself, but no one else. Everyone likes to be on top.

For many years Otoe has gotten kicked in the teeth by many of the other schools in the area and now it is the Wildcats turn to do some kicking. That's just the way the chips fall.

One of Otoe players, Roger Witt, made the Class E All-State selection last season, and appears a good bet to repeat. Another boy, Dick Steinhoff, has been playing some good basketball and is a sure candidate. These two boys can't make All-State sitting on the bench.

Then Andersen heard from an undisclosed source that Coach Ihrig had challenged the Nebraska City Pioneers to a scrimmage game.

As far as the sports writer was concerned, the cocky coach at Otoe was showing pure arrogance. Andersen was furious. But he called Bob to get his side of the story, which Coach Ihrig vehemently denied, yet Andersen went ahead and ran the damning article anyway.

The boys at Otoe, including Coach Bob Ihrig, are clamoring for a practice game or scrimmage against Nebraska City, which doesn't make too much sense.

It is an age old problem which should be approached this way! Should Nebraska City beat the Wildcats by 100 points you couldn't get an eye brow raise out of anyone, but should Otoe defeat the Pioneers by one point you would never hear the end of it.

Some states use the inner class rule of play-offs in their state basketball tournaments, which is all right, but not as the proposal is from Otoe; which is ridiculous.

To Bob, it was a slap in the face.

## **More Bad Press** *Otoe, Nebraska – December 1956*

Other area newspapers jumped on the story. Radio stations carried bits and pieces of the damaging reports. And every tidbit wound up for discussion in every local county bar.

The Wildcats had been seen as heroes and standard bearers for little Otoe. Now they had become point-greedy, evil, and zealously vindictive of opponents.

The Nebraska City Pioneers had nothing to gain by playing the Wildcats. The Pioneers were Class A and a good team. The Wildcats' egotistical coach had spurred the team on and Coach Ihrig was taking a public lashing. But truthfully, most people thought Otoe could whip Nebraska City.

With all the bad press, Bob called Jack Andersen and gave him a piece of his mind. He would live to retract every damaging word against Otoe.

Frank Uttermohlen, president of the Otoe school board defended the Wildcats and sent in a rebuttal to the *News-Press*:

In reference to two misrepresented articles about Otoes' basketball team which appeared very recently in your newspaper, we have these following facts to submit to you: The school board, Coach Ihrig and his boys have never had the idea of wanting to play Nebraska City in a scheduled basketball game. The idea of Otoe playing the City is just as ridiculous as the City wanting to play Farragut, Iowa. None of these schools have any relationship in playing one another what-so-ever. Each is in his own class and state, and should stay there. We know that Otoe is, definitely.

In the future, we feel that all scheduling of games should be done by the proper school authorities, and not by the so-called mainstreet coaches, who seem to be in on the "know" of everything.

We feel that Otoe has borne the brunt of this unjust attack by misinformed individuals, and we feel that Coach Ihrig and his boys should be treated with as much respect as the aforementioned teams.

Our community is as proud of our team as any other community is of theirs. Therefore, would you please be so kind as to show us the courtesy of presenting our side of the story as well as the other two stories which have already been published.

Otoe, like anyone else, likes to maintain good relationships with all other communities. Articles of this nature which have just been printed, tend to cause nothing but ill-feelings, resentment and uncalled-for-sarcastic criticism.

In view of the fact that school athletic programs are set up primarily to promote good citizenship and good sportsmanship among schools, we feel that these principles have been violated to a very great extent and if continued would accomplish nothing but the degradation of school functions. We sincerely hope that this article will bring to a conclusion, the unfavorable publicity which has been awarded us.

Jack Andersen responded to the whole controversy, with no resolution.

Some of the folks at Otoe picked up a paragraph from this space last week and may have gotten the wrong idea.

And perhaps you can't blame them. They have one of the hottest basketball teams in this part of the state this year and they are proud of it.

So is the News-Press. We hope the feeling will grow right up through tournament time come spring.

## **Mistletoe and a Kiss**

*Otoe, Nebraska – Saturday, December 22, 1956*

You'd have to have a pretty thick hide to not be bothered by the negative press. And, it was certainly eating at Bob. If he didn't talk to reporters, that would seem suspicious. So he took short interviews, told the truth, and kept it simple.

Coach Ihrig was in no mood to face the public. Unfortunately, it was Christmas and it was nearly mandatory to attend a party where the coach and his wife were important guests, and the hosts were fairly affluent Wildcat supporters.

Maisy moped around all day, hoping to stay home and avoid socializing with those she had nothing in common.

She had nothing pretty to wear and certainly nothing to wear that would look good on such a very pregnant woman. Besides, she knew what would happen at the party.

They would greet their hosts at the door and then Bob would step in and light up the room. His smile, his peppy walk, his lively conversation, his energy.

Maisy would head for the bar set up in the corner, get a drink, and find another corner to sulk in. She watched the evening drag on, keeping her distance from other guests, while keeping close to the corner bar.

As the evening wore on, Maisy was mildly amused as she watched couples pause briefly under the mistletoe dangling from the oak archway between the pleasant front rooms.

Another hour went by, and a few flirtatious men and women stole a quick kiss under the mistletoe. Maisy smiled to herself, knowing some of the men and women were not kissing their own spouses, no doubt wishing she was one of those lucky ones receiving a kiss.

Then in an instant, an attractive emboldened woman grabbed hold of Bob as he walked under the mistletoe. She kissed him squarely on the mouth and did not immediately let him go.

Maisy witnessed the kiss from her corner, jealous anger igniting her quick move toward the woman.

Aggression and guilt ended the party that night.

Maisy tromped through the front door with Bob right behind.

## **Denying Accusations** *Otoe, Nebraska – Late December 1956*

“Are you having an affair with that woman?” Maisy accused, spitting rage as she slammed the freezing car door.

There was no evidence to suggest her husband was having an affair aside from him working hard and putting in long hours and being single-mindedly involved in his duties as coach and teacher and administrator.

It hadn't been the first time Maisy had put voice to her mistrust. It hadn't been the first time Maisy had drank too much at a party. And it hadn't been the first time Maisy had embarrassed Bob.

Maisy's behavior in public infuriated Bob. Maisy accused Bob. Bob accused the woman. And now there was another thread of gossip Bob had to deny.

Bob felt a distance growing between himself and his wife.

Maisy felt miserable. She felt the distance, too; and went to get a sip of whiskey.

Maisy's anger persisted, fueled by hurt and jealousy and her own feelings of inadequacy until she pushed and shoved and slapped and hit. Bob didn't take it all without a measure of backlash, but eventually the fire burned out and the two went to sleep.

**Conrad “Cornie” Collins**  
*Omaha, Nebraska – Late December 1956*



*Conrad “Cornie” Collins*

Bob didn't like Maisy's drinking at social gatherings and he didn't like her drinking at home; but for now, there were other responsibilities in front of him. His direction was basketball and a game set for fun.

Back at Kearney State, learning to umpire and referee, Bob had met Conrad Collins. Known as “Cornie,” Coach Collins had been a friend and mentor to Bob and they had kept in contact over the years since then.

During the Otoe County Basketball Tournament last year, Cornie had been the head official; and consequently, he and Bob crossed paths again.

Cornie had been a sports star in high school in Huron, South Dakota, and a football and basketball star in college at Creighton University in Omaha. Now he was the head coach at the largest AA Class school in the state, the Omaha South Packers.

So far, Cornie's boys had won a state championship in football, another in baseball, and two in basketball. Coach Collins was a legend and beyond that, he was fair and honest and wanted to teach his teams to play with integrity and uprightness. In officiating, he was the same and sought to keep refereeing purely clean. No bribes. No tips. No bets.

When Cornie had offered to host a scrimmage game for Bob's Otoe basketball team, Bob had immediately been thrilled at the idea. Cornie's magnanimous attitude was reflected in his actions. Neither coach thought about differences in their teams, whether experience, skills, natural talents, size, or race.

Cornie and Bob set the date and time. The Wildcats would travel to the big city of Omaha; they just didn't know it yet.

And Otoe didn't know it yet either.

## **Packers vs. Wildcats** *Omaha, Nebraska – Late December 1956*

So it happened in late December. In a dark and empty gymnasium at South High. No fans. No families. No one, save the teams, the two coaches, two referees, and the scorekeeper.

The only lights were those on high above the court, illuminating the city boys wearing red bordered in white, and the country boys wearing white bordered in royal blue.

Otoe and Omaha were not that far apart in distance, but they were miles apart in culture. Most of the Otoe boys had never laid eyes on a black person, but even the white boys from Omaha were not the same as they.

In the end, it was just basketball. Only the game, with no cheering from fans, no bands, no boos, only grunts and groans, and the squeaks of sneakers on the gymnasium floor.

In the end, Omaha won, but not by much.

In the end, everyone left that day as friends, with the light of mutual respect.

## **Moving Up and On** *Omaha, Nebraska – Late December 1956*

Somehow Jack Andersen got wind of the scrimmage. He snooped around until he had a story scooped. An account of the game appeared in print.

The Otoe Wildcats engaged in a contest over the holiday season and the results are amazing.

The Otoe quintet, coached by Bob Ihrig, played one of the top Class AA schools in Omaha and was defeated by a narrow eight-point margin.

The tall Omaha squad that averaged over 6-3 was unable to stop high scoring All-Stater Roger Witt who poured in 30 points.

The Wildcats will be hard to cope with this season, but even so they received a slight blow last week when it was learned they must compete in Class D.

Andersen redeemed himself in Bob's eyes; and the Otoe coach was thankful the sports writer kept Cornie Collins' role hidden.

Plus, how did Andersen know that Otoe was moving up to Class D? In all of it, Coach Ihrig played the part of an in-control coach. He told reporters he valued the class change for the team and the school, but he wasn't expecting it this year. Publically, he applauded the move.

The *Lincoln Journal* picked up on the story.

Jumping from Class E to Class D hasn't slowed down Bob Ihrig's Otoe basketball team.

In fact, the current club is off to a better start than last season. To refresh your memory, Otoe won 24 of 27 games during the 1955-1956 campaign.

So far, Otoe has registered a 9-0 record.

In practice games the team has lost once – to a Class AA team from Omaha by a scant eight points.

Otoe has discovered, however, that Class D is a dynamic packed division.

The Top Ten teams for example have won 58 games while losing only 4. Three of those four defeats were doled out by higher classified schools.

Southeast Nebraska is a hotbed for good Class D clubs.

Privately, Bob was not happy. The deck would be stacked against Otoe. Larger towns, bigger schools, and better teams. To even contend in the state basketball tournament this season might be an impossible dream.

The competition just ratcheted up a couple notches or more.

## **Rates and Ranks**

### *Lincoln, Nebraska – January 1, 1957*

There it was in print. The first basketball rankings of the season. All high school class divisions were listed. There it was on New Year's Day in the *Lincoln Star*.

Otoe ... with big win totals, tops the Star's first basketball ratings in Class D. Coach Bob Ihrig's Otoe club has a 9 – 0 start to lead Class D.

- The Star's Top Three***  
***Class D***  
***1. Otoe (9-0)***  
***2. Sprague-Martell (7-0)***  
***3. Ruskin (5-0)***

But newspapers give opinions, and the *Lincoln Journal* made Sprague-Martell #1 and Otoe #2. The *Omaha World Herald* made Otoe #5.

Regardless of the rank, it was high and any high rating only made the expectations more pressing.

Bob reminded himself that the remaining schedule would be the same, with a mixture of Class D and Class C opponents, just as it had been before. The worrisome part would be tournament time. Then he began to speculate about the sudden move to Class D and wondered whether it had anything to do with the referees who he had chastised during games, in front of crowds, and after games. As a seasoned referee, Bob knew the ropes. He knew of some who had accepted tips. He had reported some of the men who were not upright. He wanted to keep the games clean and honest. Fair and square!

## **Roger Royal**

### *Nebraska City, Nebraska – January 7, 1957*

Maisy was miserable. She had a horrible rash to her hands from work at the canning factory. She had been to the doctor for treatment, but the rash was no better.

Not one thing at home brought her any joy. Three lively children to care for and a demanding husband left her exhausted. The winter cold and an inadequate furnace forced the family into one room of the house where an old rusty heater provided some warmth. Maisy washed clothes on the frigid back porch with a wringer washing machine. It was too cold to hang the clothes outside on the clothes line, so she hung them around the kitchen where there was a bit of heat from the stovetop.

Everything was a heavy burden. Nothing was thrilling. And she was nowhere near prepared for what was next.

It was an early Monday, a wintery morning before dawn. January 7, 1957. Maisy woke Bob. Get dressed. Warm up the car. Throw some things in a suitcase. Head out of town.

Bob steered the family car on the narrow and snow packed road south for twenty-three miles to the Community Hospital in Nebraska City.

Ready or not for Maisy that day, another baby was born. Another boy. Another charge. Another reason to work.

And then, Jack Andersen appeared. As long as the Ihrigs were in town, he would stop in and get another bit of juice about the Otoe Wildcats and their passionate coach.

He wondered about the new baby's name, Roger Royal, though he had guessed the origin of the first name.

Roger was the star of the Wildcats and the best player Bob had coached thus far. Royal came from Royal Turner, the little sophomore guard from Venango. Part of "Royal" also came from Otoe's royal blue, true blue color, so it was a proud name with history and meaning, and Coach Ihrig hoped his second son would wear it well.

## **“Little Victory Hall”**

### ***Otoe, Nebraska – Early January 1957***

Where the Wildcats left off, they picked right up.

Game 10: Otoe 65 – Weston 31  
(Roger Witt 22, Dick Steinhoff 17, Jerry Gorton 12)

Game 11: Otoe 90 – Nehawka 42  
(Roger Witt 15, Dick Steinhoff 11, Jerry Gorton 34, Roger Fey 16, Duane Hillman 11)

The hours and days were filled with school and practice. The minutes and nights were full of games. Varsity basketball, junior varsity, volleyball.

Somehow, Coach Ihrig had arranged for Game 12 to be played at home. Otoe’s little Victory Hall would be the court for the contest against the Syracuse Rockets.

That is what the Syracuse constituents called the Otoe gymnasium, “Little Victory Hall.” To Syracuse it made no sense to not meet in Syracuse. The town was larger. The gym was larger. The proceeds were larger.

This year would be different. Coach Ihrig believed the Wildcats could beat the Rockets. Surely, he was realistically optimistic, but he was convinced that on any given day, any team could beat any other team.

And this year, he was doing his best to prepare for a hometown victory at Little Victory Hall.

## **Out of Sync**

### ***Otoe, Nebraska – Mid January 1957***

It was a Tuesday game. The week had just begun. There was scarcely time for final preparations for a monumental game.

And then, two big yellow buses from Syracuse rolled into town. Players and coaches and girls in pep club. A caravan of cars crept along behind the buses, bringing parents and families and Syracuse teachers.

The Rockets early arrival knocked Coach Ihrig out of sync.

Gee Willikers!

## **Ticket Scramble**

*Otoe, Nebraska – Mid January 1957*

Bob opened Victory Hall to the team and coaches, and quickly locked the doors behind him.

A thousand details ran through his mind. He began to worry about the pressing matter of gymnasium seats and game tickets.

Jack Andersen from Nebraska City and Ron Gibson from the *Lincoln Star* requested courtside reserved seating. Bob printed the sports writers' names on a piece of paper and taped them on two chairs – one for Otoe, and another opposite the court for Syracuse.

It was January cold outside. It wasn't right to leave the pep club and fans outdoors, so Coach Ihrig unlocked the doors again and the Syracuse assembly crowded in.

There would be no ticket sales until the advertised time and even then, the tickets would be fairly and evenly dispensed.

It wasn't long and the whole of Otoe knew Syracuse had arrived early. Shops closed. Businesses locked their doors. It was a rush for tickets and it was going to be a mad scramble.

## **Rocks and Cans - Not Sticks and Stones**

*Otoe, Nebraska – Mid January 1957*

By the time the girls' volleyball got underway at 4:00, the audience had found their seats. Spectators were so squished together, there was not an inch between.

The closeness of the crowd made way for an overall excitement, a sense of growing irritation, an edgy rivalry.

The Wildcat girls won in volleyball, but the Rockets handed the Wildcat junior varsity basketball squad their first loss.

By the time the senior varsity players started to warm up, the gymnasium was stuffy and hot, and stank of sweat and cigarette smoke.

It was a wild game that night. Pushing and shoving. Pent-up aggression on both sides. High school basketball had become a very serious sport.

When the second half got underway, the Rockets fans had roughly ramped themselves up. Out of coat pockets came tin cans and rocks. Inflammatory chants to the tune of banging cans and ramming rocks invigorated Syracuse and threatened the Wildcats on court.

Coach Ihrig yelled himself hoarse during the third quarter. His team was in complete disarray, stymied by the Rockets and their thunderous crowd.

And then, someone saw Coach Ihrig fade ghostly white. His legs began to dissolve under him, but he was caught by two of his players on the sideline who lowered him to a seat.

Somehow, miraculously, he managed to call the plays from his chair to finish out the game. To Bob, the rest was just a blur.

## **Headliner**

*Nebraska City, Nebraska – Mid January 1957*

When the buzzer sounded, Coach Ihrig was still in a fog. He knew where he was and he knew the game was over. He looked up at the scoreboard to confirm what he feared was a loss.

But no! It had been a Wildcat win!

Game 12: Otoe 51 – Syracuse 45

(Roger Witt 20, Dick Steinhoff 9, Jerry Gorton 4, Duane Hillman 11)

The headline on the sports page in the *Nebraska City News-Press* was big and bold:

**Wildcats Thump Syracuse for 12<sup>th</sup> Straight Win  
Victory First in nearly 20 years for Otoe**

**By Jack Andersen**

The Otoe Wildcats shook off a cold third quarter Tuesday evening and rallied to pick up their 12<sup>th</sup> straight victory, a 51-45 win over Syracuse.

The win marked the first time in nearly 20 years that the Rockets have lost to an Otoe team.

Mickey Antes gave the Rockets their only lead of the game when he hit a jump shot early in the opening quarter. Seconds later Roger Witt got the Wildcats off to a running start as he hit three field goals and a free throw without missing. Otoe led throughout the initial period and commanded a 19 – 14 advantage at the end of the stanza.

With Roger Fey and Duane Hillman leading the way in the second period the Wildcats were able to mesh 17 points while holding Syracuse to 11 for a 36-25 margin at halftime.

The field goal by Fey late in the second quarter proved to be the last one made by the Wildcats until the fourth period. The winners were able to connect for only one free throw during the entire period while Coach Ron Wagner's boys were slowly closing the gap to 37-34 entering the stretch.

The situation facing Coach Bob Ihrig's top rated Class D club at the start of the fourth period was either to break the scoring ice or face defeat for the first time this season.

The field goal barrier was broken quickly as Dick Steinhoff, Witt, and Jerry Gorton each connected for field goals to give the Wildcats a 43-34 advantage with 4:35 remaining in the game and squelch all hopes of an upset by the Rockets.

Twice late in the game Syracuse was able to pull within five points of the Wildcats, but they could never get over the hump.

Heading the Otoe attack once again was All-Stater Roger Will who poured in 20 points, 11 of which came in the first period.

It had been the lowest point production of the season, no doubt attributed to the low number of fouls being called. Oh well, Coach would need to work with varying styles of refereeing, and factor those into his game plan.

Apparently, Coach needed to get some rest, but it was unlikely to happen.

## **Otoe County Tournament** *Syracuse, Nebraska – Late January 1957*

A win over the Rockets was certainly worthy of celebration, yet it was going to become disastrous if the boys didn't get off their high-horses. So went the thoughts of Coach Ihrig as he championed self-confidence and squelched arrogance.



*Poster for the 1957 Otoe County Basketball Tournament*

But anyone could see what was in the boys' minds as they swaggered down the halls at school. Add now, the *Omaha World Herald* ranked them third. They earned top seed in the upcoming tournament, and the media kept the glory coming.

If they weren't careful, "*how the high have been brought low*" would be applied to them.

Luckily, the tournament's first game with #1 ranked Otoe and #9 Unadilla went off as predicted. By the end of the first period, Otoe was 23 points ahead of Unadilla, and Coach pulled Roger Witt from the game to nurse his injured leg. Even then, the win was well in hand.

Game 13: Otoe 83 – Unadilla 39  
(Roger Witt 10, Dick Steinhoff 20, Jerry Gorton 24)

By the time the semi-final was executed, Roger Witt was needed for the entire game. Against the Talmage Bulldogs, the Wildcats contended to maintain a lead, and pulled way ahead in the end to secure a comfortable win.

Game 14: Otoe 66 – Talmage 42  
(Roger Witt 28, Dick Steinhoff 12, Jerry Gorton 16)

## **County Finals** *Syracuse, Nebraska – Friday, January 25, 1957*

It was too good to be true! But the boys from "Little Berlin" were in this position for the second year in a row.

The Wildcats of Otoe were seeded #1 against the #3 Rockets of Syracuse to play out the finals at the Otoe County Basketball Tournament.



*Coach Bob Ihrig huddled with his Otoe Wildcats at the Otoe County Tournament*

Did Syracuse actually stoop to the shenanigans of selling early tickets to their own fans first? The tickets were mostly gone by the time the Otoe fans arrived, much to the consternation of those who had traveled the winter roads to see their sons and grandsons play.

Was this a payback from the previous week at “Little Victory Hall”?

Five hundred screaming fans were on their feet as the ball was tipped into the air. In the opening minutes, Roger Witt hit four consecutive fielders to give the Wildcats an early lead.

Syracuse Coach Ron Wagner’s starting five didn’t flinch, and fought back with strong defensive play and good ball movement to pull ahead by a single point as the first quarter came to an end.

In the second period the lead exchanged hands eight times, with a three point Rocket advantage at half time.

Coach Ihrig loathed being behind. He got down on one knee and glared at the team. He accused them of being weak. He called them sissies. He told them to stay in the locker room if they didn’t intend to perform better during the second half. Then he walked out without another word.

The shellacking at half time by Coach seemed to have the desired effect, because the boys responded and pulled ahead by five points as the third period came to a close.

Then Coach Ihrig stalled. He hated teams who stalled. Play the game – win or lose. He despised the tactic and now he was using it himself. Pass the ball. Back and forth. Teasing the other team. Like a cat swinging a mouse by the tail. *Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock...*

Still, the Rockets managed to score and were down one with four minutes to go. The Rockets stole some of the Wildcat passes and fouled to do so, which in the end led to the Wildcat win from free throws.

With so few Otoe fans, the gym was eerily quiet, as the Rocket players filed out and off the court. There was no thunder in Syracuse that night; the Wildcats had stolen it away.

Game 15: Otoe 59 – Syracuse 50

(Roger Witt 23, Dick Steinhoff 18, Jerry Gorton 3, Duane Hillman 12)

## **The Good** *Syracuse, Nebraska – Late January 1957*

Overcome with the pure joy of winning the championship, Coach Ihrig jumped fully clothed into the showers with his team.

Nearby, sat the trophy of trophies, the image of a tall basketball player, stretched and golden on top a lightly stained oak base. On the brass plate was printed:

**1957**  
*Otoe County Basketball Champions*  
**OTOE WILDCATS**  
*Coach Bob Ihrig*

The plan was to flourish the trophy in front of their fans gathered at the Village Tavern. A congregation of Otoeans. A celebration of victory.

Suddenly, the door to the locker room opened and the Syracuse coach entered in. Coach Wagner had the attention of the Wildcats and most especially the Otoe coach.

It was congratulations he brought. Kudos to the team and to the coach. Wishes for the coming games and appreciation for the one just played. Then he turned and quietly exited the room, closing the door behind him.

Sportsmanship. It made fierce opponents into friends.

## **The Bad** *Syracuse, Nebraska – Late January 1957*

Not everyone from Syracuse was as magnanimous as Coach Wagner.

A few angry Rocket fans had gathered outside the entrance; apparently, ready to start a fight once the team exited the building. As the minutes ticked by and the Syracuse boys grew colder, they stomped their feet, smacked ball bats against the frozen ground, one snapped a bull whip; and they all smoked and drank and cursed.

The aged school janitor warned Coach Bob and suggested he call for a ride to the Tavern, leaving through the back entrance.

Within minutes, twenty-some pick-ups arrived at the school's back door in order to deliver the pride and joy of Otoe to the Village Tavern.

The janitor locked the heavy door behind them. Slowly he pushed the wide broom in front of him, eying the Syracuse boys as they blew smoke in the frigid night air. The bad would eventually disperse, their bad plan foiled.

## **The Ugly** *Otoe, Nebraska – Late January 1957*

Jack Andersen and Bob spoke by phone the morning after the final game.

The “ugly” showed up in print:

Well the Otoe County Basketball Tournament is over for another year and everyone involved should be happy, at least financially. The Syracuse gym was packed for every game, except the two one-sided ones Tuesday evening.

It is a definite shame that fans at such athletic events can't take the defeats as well as do the players and coaches. There were some real angry Syracuse fans following the tournament and many harsh words were exchanged.

On the other side, and the good side, Ron Wagner, fine young coach at Syracuse, was in the Otoe dressing room for at least 20 minutes following the game and personally shook hands with each and every Otoe Player.

The same courtesy was shown by Coach Bob Ihrig who went to the Syracuse showers to tell the boys they played a nice game.

School alumni and fans, in my opinion, are too quick to forget. Only last year the Rockets took a thrilling 48-47 win from Otoe. The loss was a heartbreaker for the boys and fans from Otoe.

At that time the Syracuse team had three or four seniors, and the Otoe had not a senior. The fans at that time should have started thinking that this would be the big year for Otoe.

Coach Wagner has a young ball club and a good one. Before too long he will have the Rockets back on top, so Syracuse fans, please be patient and be good sports.

## **All-Tournament Team** *Otoe, Nebraska – Late January 1957*

The *Nebraska City News-Press* released their All-Tournament Team. It was no surprise that the Otoe Wildcats dominated the First Team.

### **FIRST TEAM**

Roger Witt – Otoe  
Gene Nannen – Syracuse  
Dick Steinhoff – Otoe  
Martin Kelly – Palmyra  
Jerry Gorton – Otoe

### **SECOND TEAM**

Dave Cowell – Talmage  
Dick Powers – Palmyra  
Duane Hillman – Otoe  
Mickey Antes – Syracuse  
Larry Bartels – Syracuse

In response to the County championship and tournament accolades, the ladies of the Lutheran Church honored Coach Ihrig and the Wildcats to a basket supper. Over 130 people attended. Small town Nebraska. Big time support.

## **La-la Land**

### *Otoe, Nebraska – Early February 1957*

The boys couldn't see it. Their infallible arrogance. The team was in la-la land. It was easy to fall into, given they were the talk of the town, the worship of the girls, the idols of younger boys.

So Coach kept Roger Witt on the bench in the game with the Cook Cougars, hoping to rest Roger's injury and to keep some attitudes in check. But by the end of the first period, Otoe was trailing and Roger went in.

Back the Wildcats rolled.

Game 16: Otoe 77 – Cook 48  
(Roger Witt 24, Dick Steinhoff 28, Jerry Gorton 18)

In the next game, Coach went with a new strategy of playing every single player, hoping to not run up the score. But everyone scored.

Even Freshman Jon Gorton, Jerry's baby brother, the smallest man on court, scored. He made the most baskets in the second half and Jerry never heard the end of it.

Game 17: Otoe 92 – Burr 28  
(Roger Witt 18, Dick Steinhoff 21, Jerry Gorton 10, Jon Gorton 17)

## **Globetrotters**

### *Otoe, Nebraska – Early February 1957*

The Wildcats could have scored a lot more points against Burr, but Roger Witt's lingering injury put him on the bench after the first eight minutes of play.

Substitutions. In and out. Baskets and rebounds. The ball in the air.

Watching the embarrassment for Burr, Bob came to the conviction that no high school team should score above 100. He had already been accused of running up the score, and he didn't want that rap ever pinned on him again. It seemed inevitable.

At the tick of four minutes to go against Burr, Coach Ihrig called a time-out.

“Stop scoring!” he ordered.

The boys were having a ball. They couldn't believe what he was asking.

“I'll kick you off the team if you score another god-damn point!”

The tirade continued and at practice on Monday, Coach pushed through the boys, and scooped up the red, white, and blue ball they were using. The boys had painted it to represent the world-famous Harlem Globetrotters. The towering thin black athletes dribbled and pivoted, back-passed and dunked and the Wildcats attempted every move.

There is no fantasy in high school basketball. It's just real practice by real boys.

Coach tucked the deplorably painted ball into the bend of his elbow and stood in front of his team. “I don't like the way you look. I don't like the way you walk, and I don't like the way you talk.” Dramatically, he took the ink pen from his shirt pocket and pierced the pathetic looking ball. “You're not hot shit and you haven't won anything worth anything yet.”

With that, he threw the now-deflated ball as far across the floor as it would go, and walked away, mumbling that he should have done it sooner.

## **Absent**

### *Otoe, Nebraska – Early February 1957*

In his own mind, Bob took partial responsibility for the way the boys had been acting. Coaching involves more than practice and game-time strategies. It meant molding character, and he had made it his business to make a difference in the lives of those he coached.

Not so much at home. Bob's involvement was limited by time and focus.

When he was at home, he talked about practice, the boys, and their games. In the evening, he kept thick scrapbooks of newspaper articles about the Wildcats. Hand-written comments accompanied each write-up.

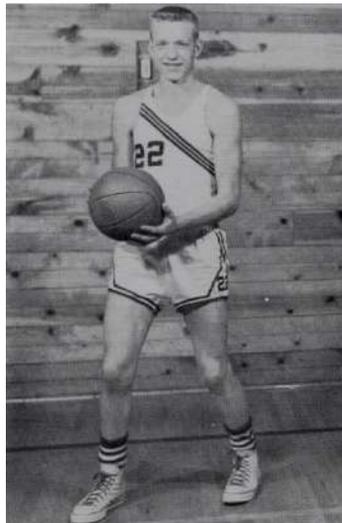
Peace and quiet. Rest and recovery. That's what he wanted at home. But he needed to be a husband and father and he was just plainly spent, that with all the energy it took at his career. Wasn't it what society expected?

Home was less than happy. Pammy Sue and Bobby Mark were old enough to be half-afraid of their dad. This they had learned from being scolded or spanked for the smallest of infractions. Wasn't it how fathers were?

After almost a decade, Maisy still couldn't figure it all out. Being a mother of four and wife of a coach was harder than she could have ever imagined. With the lack of support for her, she drank and smoked throughout her days. Wasn't it acceptable?

## **Injured**

*Otoe, Nebraska – Early February 1957*



*Dick Steinhoff – Most Improved Player - #22*

Dick Steinhoff had made the most improvements to his skills during the 1956-57 season. From his post as forward, he had been averaging 23 points per game and ten rebounds.

It happened in a split second, as bad luck always does. Dick was on the floor. He had been going up for a rebound and fell, hitting his already banged-up knee on the wooden court. He landed in an awkward position, and there he stayed, until Coach and teammates helped him to the sideline.

It wasn't even a regular game. Merely a scrimmage, but Coach was pushing hard. Bob knew what was coming, and the next opponents were not going to be easy.

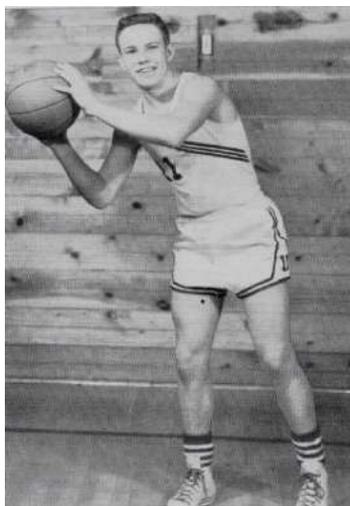
For the span of four years, Dick Steinhoff and Roger Witt had been a synchronous duo. But now, each with his own injury, their impact was breaking down.

Injuries weighed heavy on Coach's mind as he drove Dick to Lincoln to see a specialist. He would keep his leg elevated and iced for several days. He would return to practice after at least two weeks.

That meant it was the end of the regular season for Dick. But what about districts?

## **Derailed**

*Elmwood, Nebraska – Mid February 1957*



*Jerry Gorton, starting junior guard #11*

With Dick out, Jerry Gorton carried on against Walton, and scored 15 points in the first three quarters and 20 more while Roger Witt rested his leg stretched out on the bench in the last eight minutes.

Game 18: Otoe 84 – Walton 48

(Roger Witt 25, Dick Steinhoff dnp, Jerry Gorton 35, Merlin Kastens 10)

Dick Steinhoff had been transported to Lincoln General Hospital where he received treatment on his knee. Doctors attempted to extract blood that had accumulated under the knee cap, but the procedure failed and it looked like Dick's season was finished.

Bob and the rest of the team mourned the loss of Dick. There was no energy at practice. The boys putzed around, aimlessly making feeble attempts to do what Coach directed.

Heavy shoes. Heavy legs. Heavy hearts.

Then the girls lost at volleyball for the opening event at Elmwood. And the junior varsity lost after that.

When the senior varsity came out to warm up, they seemed beaten even before the first whistle blew.

Game 19: Otoe 46 – Elwood 53

(Roger Witt 16, Dick Steinhoff dnp, Jerry Gorton 18)

Heavy. And Hopeless.

## **Stew and Scheme**

### *Otoe, Nebraska – Mid February 1957*

Bob went home and crawled into bed. He stayed there till Monday morning. Defeat resurrected new thoughts and plans as nothing else could.

The Wildcats *could* have won; it was a matter of fact. The Otoe school board *should* have allowed football. It *would* have put the team miles ahead in conditioning.

Consolidation with Syracuse loomed in the future, which made Otoe's future uncertain.

South and west of Otoe lay Clatonia, a small Class D school in Gage County. There Coach Gene Else had led the Clatonia Cardinals and superintended the school for the past ten years.

The Cardinals were 18 and 1, but Coach Else was ready to move on, to take an administrative position with a government agency, the Agriculture Farm Commission in Beatrice at the end of the school year.

He wanted to make sure the boys he had coached since grade school would have someone who could take them even higher than he had.

So Gene had called Bob and bragged on his team, urging him to apply for the upcoming vacant position.

Bob was already aware of the Clatonia Cardinals and their possible match-up with his Wildcats in this year's state tournament.

## **Shocker**

*Otoe, Nebraska – Mid February 1957*



Clatonia Cardinals Coach Gene Else and Otoe Wildcats Coach Bob Ihrig

The coaches saw no good reason to prolong the news. The timing fit. While Otoe brooded over the first loss of the season, Bob started planning for next year. There would be a

new six-man football program at Clatonia, which had been part of the deal. Gene wanted a smooth transition. It was better to make the announcement now, before district play.

**Ihrig Resigns Otoe Post**  
**By Jack Andersen**

Bob Ihrig, superintendent and coach at Otoe High school for the past two years, announced his resignation today which will be effective at the end of the current school year.

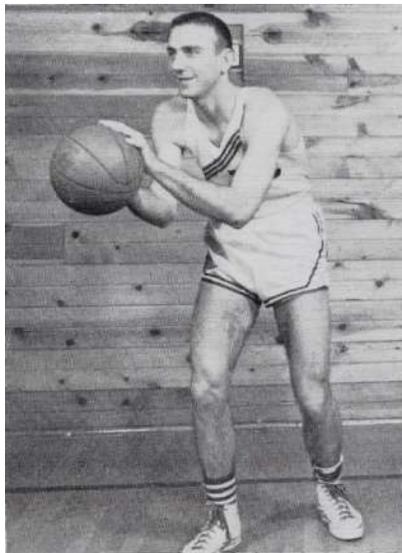
Mr. Ihrig said he has accepted a similar position at Clatonia, Neb. He would not reveal his salary, but said it was a sizeable increase over the \$4600 he received at Otoe.

As a basketball coach, Ihrig has compiled one of the most enviable records in the state. During his two year stay at Otoe he has a 42 – 3 record which includes last years 24 – 3 record and 18 straight wins this season.

The Wildcat team was runner up in the area basketball playoffs last season and just missed by two points a trip to the state tournament.

Ihrig is a graduate of Kearney State Teachers College. He is married and has four children.

**Sprague-Martell Central Panthers**  
*Syracuse, Nebraska – Mid February 1957*



*Roger Witt – All-State Center - #55*

Prior to Dick's injury and the loss to Elmwood, Otoe and Sprague-Martell had made an arrangement to play their regularly scheduled game on a different day in a different location. Instead of Victory Hall, the game was to be played in Syracuse where the gymnasium was larger

and more tickets could be sold. The schools needed the money; but in retrospect, Bob wished he hadn't agreed.

Last year, Sprague-Martell beat Otoe by two points in the final game of regionals.

This year, Roger Witt beat the Sprague-Martell Central Panthers.

**Otoe Wildcats Win**  
**All-State Center Roger Witt Thrills Crowd at Syracuse**  
**By Jack Andersen**

The Otoe Wildcats played their finest game of the season Wednesday evening as they downed the once highly rated Sprague-Martell Central, 52-50.

Over 500 fans jammed the Syracuse gymnasium and watched the most dazzling display of high school basketball ever displayed by a high school player.

Roger Witt, the Wildcats All-State center, scored 32 points, over half his teams total, and consistently scored the points that either tied the game or gave them a small lead.

In addition to his high scoring efforts Witt did a magnificent job of getting rebounds from the giant Central Quintet. Four of the starting five players on the Central unit were taller than Witt.

The Wildcats were also hampered by not having the services of Dick Steinhoff, star forward who is out with a knee injury. He was released from the hospital Wednesday following an operation on his knee and watched the game from the bench.

Included among the spectators were players and coaches from no less than ten high schools and representatives of three colleges including Peru State, Hastings College and the University of Nebraska.

The winners got off to a running start in the early stages of the game sparked by two free throws by Witt and (after three) fielder they had a quick 8 -0 lead.

In the third period Coach Bob Ihrig's quintet began to roll and Witt scored 12 of his teams 15 points goals. Entering the stretch the Wildcats were on the long end of a 43-40 count.

During the fourth quarter Coach Ihrig began to use a semi-stall which almost backfired. The quarter was a very low scoring affair with Otoe getting only 9 points and Central managing ten.

Dick Hines tied the score at 50-50 for Coach Lloyd Mann's crew with only 15 seconds left, but the smooth operating Otoe unit advanced the ball down the floor and Witt made an easy jump shot from the key hole with only 2 second remaining in the game.

**Game 20: Otoe 52 – Sprague-Martell 50**

(Roger Witt 32, Dick Steinhoff dnp, Jerry Gorton 9)

## Win #20

### *Otoe, Nebraska – Mid February 1957*

Every remaining opponent had battled hard against the Wildcats as the end of the regular season drew near. The finale with the Bulldogs of Talmage proved tougher than anyone could have imagined. At intermission the two were tied at 24.

Roger Witt pulled the Wildcats ahead with 14 points in the third period before fouling out. Then Jerry Gorton took charge in the last quarter, scoring 10 of his 19 game points for the win.

Game 21: Otoe 72 – Talmage 51

(Roger Witt 28, Dick Steinhoff dnp, Jerry Gorton 19, Roger Fey 12)

Gratified by another win, Bob cut out Jack Andersen's article about the game and pasted it into his scrapbook with a hand-written addendum: "20 wins in one season – Not Bad!"

## District Tournament

### *Bellevue, Nebraska – Late February*

**"D" District Tournament**  
at  
**Bellevue's Gym**  
Bellevue, Nebr.  
**FEB. 25 - 26 - 27 - 28**

Tournament Pairings

Otoe (9c)	Game No. 1 Feb. 25th 6:30 P.M. Dunbar (24)	Game No. 5 Feb. 27th 6:30 P.M. Elmwood (9)
Omaha Nebr. Deaf (30)	Game No. 2 Feb. 25th 8:15 P.M. Elmwood (11)	Game No. 7 Feb. 28th 7:30 P.M. Springfield (10)
Neb. City St. Bernard's (24)	Game No. 3 Feb. 26th 6:30 P.M. Springfield (15)	Game No. 8 Feb. 27th 8:15 P.M. Grana (14)
Tutun (13)	Game No. 4 Feb. 26th 8:15 P.M. Grana (14)	

**Admission: Adults 75c Students 50c**  
Parking in Kongsard's Lot 1/2 Block East of High School -- After 6 P.M.

*Nebraska City News-Press Class D District Bracket*

"Baloney!" Coach Ihrig answered curtly, when complainers accused him of having lost interest in Otoe.

It was only natural for Bob to think about his future in Clatonia. But to pass judgment that he wouldn't give the upcoming district tournament anything but 100% of his attention was just plain ridiculous, even insulting.

In the second quarter of the first game of districts against the Dunbar Wolves, Dick Steinhoff surprised the team when he played a spell, and sank a basket at the free throw line. By then, the Wildcats had secured a comfortable lead, perhaps inspired by the return of their teammate.

Game 22: Otoe 70 – Dunbar 42

(Roger Witt 17, Dick Steinhoff 3, Jerry Gorton 19, Duane Hillman 12)

The Pirates from Elmwood had had a strong season, topped with a win over the Wildcats. So when Otoe gained a win in districts over Elmwood, it was sweet revenge.

Game 23: Otoe 60 – Elmwood 48

(Roger Witt 17, Dick Steinhoff 15, Jerry Gorton 14)

The trio of Witt, Steinhoff, and Gorton were back in sync.

Victorious for a third year in a row, the Wildcats brought back home another district trophy to showcase inside Victory Hall.

But first stop to show it off was the Village Tavern.

Game 24: Otoe 54 – Springfield 40

(Roger Witt 14, Dick Steinhoff 10, Jerry Gorton 12)

## **Expectations**

### ***Otoe, Nebraska – Late February 1957***

Coach Ihrig perched himself at the end of the old bar rail at the Village Tavern and swallowed hard on his Falstaff.

The players cheered their three victories and the trophy which sat on the bar in front of them.

The townsfolk cheered the boys and the seemingly-easily-won district tournament. Bob knew it hadn't been easy and what lay ahead wouldn't be either.

Regionals were coming; and after that, the state tournament. Bob heard the Otoeites as the beer made them bolder. It was as if they were already celebrating the win of it all.

Never mind practice. Never mind possible new injuries or the exacerbation of old ones. Never mind stellar opponents.

Bob was not smiling. He picked up the trophy and drove home.

## **Regionals**

### *Peru, Nebraska – Early March 1957*

His nerves pulled taut against whatever drove Coach Ihrig to this level of working to be the best, the highest, the most.

The competition in the regional tournament literally set Coach aglow as he told the boys: “Right now, tonight is the most important game of your life!”

*Just before tip-off Coach huddled the boys together: “The team that controls the tempo will win tonight. Play fast. Keep your passes sharp. Now let’s go!”*

Dick Steinhoff hit two quick baskets to give the Wildcats an early lead over DeWitt. Any spectator would never have guessed that Dick had just had surgery to his knee. He played like Superman and never slowed down.

Game 25: Otoe 59– DeWitt 50

(Roger Witt 15, Dick Steinhoff 34, Jerry Gorton 4)

One victory down. One to go.

## **Regional Finals** *Peru, Nebraska – Early March 1957*



*L to R: Coach Bob Ihrig, Roger Witt, Dick Steinhoff, Duane Hillman, Roger Fey, Jerry Gorton*

The small village of Verdon in Richardson County flanks Kansas and Missouri to the south and east.

The Trojans of Verdon had just won over Sprague-Martell and were the top defensive unit in Class D. Although they hadn't played as many games as the Wildcats; still, their record was impressive. Fifteen wins and 1 early loss.

The Wildcats had the best offense in Class D. Twenty-four wins and 1 loss.

The exit straw poll taken after the first two semi-final games surprised Bob. But actually, to be the underdog was a good thing.

The majority of tournament attendees picked the Trojans to win the southeast regionals.

Bob anticipated the contest with a dream of glory.

## **The Verdon Trojans** *Peru, Nebraska – Early March 1957*

Near panic. Pain in the chest. Raw nerves. And pacing prior to tip-off.

Coach Ihrig had watched Verdon play Sprague-Martell and the Trojans were the best defensive team he had seen.

Verdon's coach, John Penney, had created a tenacious man-to-man defense which suffocated their opponents. On offense, the starting five had always slowed the pace, and patiently worked the ball around until they found an open man.

A loud horn blasted and the start of the regional finals began. From the outset, Verdon frustrated Otoe. By the end of the first period, Coach Ihrig could barely speak, he was so hoarse from yelling. It was 13 to 6 and no one could believe the Trojans had held the Wildcats to a mere three baskets in an entire quarter.

During the second period, each team added fourteen and the Trojans maintained a seven point lead as the teams headed into the locker rooms – 27 to 20.

Bob was seeing a pattern. At first, he thought he was imagining it, but every time the Wildcats generated momentum, one of the referees blew his whistle. It was a ticky-tack foul or a questionable call for traveling, or this, or that.

Early in the second half, the Trojans stretched their lead to thirteen, mostly due to the spirited play of Ralph German and Darrell Fisher.

With 2:37 left in the third period, Coach Ihrig called a time-out in an attempt to stop the Trojan rally. The Wildcats were faced with an ultimatum: "Get going or go home."

The referee Coach Ihrig was watching seemed to be targeting Roger Witt who was boiling mad and getting angrier by the minute. His anger inspired the team and the boys followed Roger's leadership. By the end of the quarter, Otoe was only trailing by five.

In the final period, Coach Ihrig switched to a full-court zone press and Verdon began to struggle. After a couple of take-a-ways by the Wildcats, it was a one point game with six minutes left to play – 49 to 48.

With Verdon favoring a narrow lead, the Trojans stalled and held the ball for nearly three minutes. Otoe was forced to foul and it was back and forth from there. Ralph German hit both free throws and Roger Witt responded with a field goal of his own – 51 to 50.

Once again, the Trojans stalled. Once again, Otoe fouled. Darrell Fisher hit his free throws and Roger Witt scored again – 53 to 52.

And again, the Trojans stalled, teasing Otoe with an irritating game of catch, until Otoe fouled again. Darrell Fisher's free throws went in, but no rebuttal – 55 to 52.

Never let an opponent see your frustration; yet the Wildcats did, and the Trojans stole the ball.

Every Trojan fan, coach, and player rose with a cheer; but no, it wasn't over.

With 45 seconds left, Wildcat Duane Hillman intercepted a Trojan pass, and brought it dangerously close again, still a Trojan lead – 55 to 54.

Verdon stalled; but wait, Jerry Gorton stole the ball giving new hope to Otoe's faithful.

Coach Ihrig immediately called a time-out with 27 seconds left. The plan was clear: "Play for the last shot and get the ball into Roger Witt. C'mon. Let's go win this game."

Now Otoe stalled, watching the seconds tick away. Roger Fey, a Wildcat guard, tried to move toward Witt, but the Trojan defense circled him closely making it impossible to get the ball into him. With five seconds to go, Fey released a 30 foot shot. The ball struck high off the top of the rim as the buzzer sounded.

Game 26: Otoe 54 – Verdon 55  
(Roger Witt 33, Dick Steinhoff 5, Jerry Gorton 10)

## **Surprise Visitor** *Peru, Nebraska – Early March 1957*

The end.

The end of the game.

The end of the season.

For three years, by the slimmest of margins, Otoe had failed to win regionals. But with true sportsmanship, the team shook their opponents' hands, wishing them well at state.

Bob crossed the court and congratulated Coach Penney, commending him on the Trojan defense which had brought about their victory.

At center-court, the Trojans were awarded the trophy which made them the Class D Southeast Region winners. Next week they would travel to Lincoln, while the Wildcats would be sitting at home.

At the ceremony closing, the Wildcats walked silently to the locker room, their dejection visible by the slowness of their gaits and the downward angle of their heads.

In the locker, there was silence. No one spoke; there was nothing to say.

The door pushed open then, moved by an unexpected and unwelcomed guest.

The contentious referee paused a second until he spotted the target of his spite. He swaggered over to the young boy and snarled through his clenched teeth; "Witt, I told you we'd get ya!"

## **Cheated**

*Otoe, Nebraska – Early March 1957*

Coach Ihrig stood there a minute, and realized that they just witnessed a confession of cheating.

There were referees who, with a few strategic calls, changed the outcome of a game. How could they do such a thing? Cheating young boys? For what? Power? Money?

Bob hated these cheaters. But to report this man? It would do him or the team no good. It was their word against the referee's, and they would be viewed as poor losers.

What should Coach do? Call the referees' association? Call the newspaper?

No, nothing would be gained by placing blame where it so obviously should go. Instead, the boys would learn the lesson to “turn the other cheek and walk away.” No one went to the Village Tavern that night. It was home to bed without a word. Nothing could ease the fact – or ease the grief.

**“It’s Just a Game!”**  
*Otoe, Nebraska – Early March 1957*

There is darkness in defeat.

Bob was not a gracious loser. Being obsessed with winning as he was, this was downright humiliating.

Maisy had planned a celebratory meal at home, with the table laid in their best dishes. She wore a dress which she struggled to fit into after Roger’s birth, but she wanted to be a good wife and support Bob the best she could.

But when Bob stepped over the threshold, his face was pale and ashen. Torment was in his red-rimmed eyes and his hands were shaking.

Not a word did he speak. The only thing Maisy could think to say rang true; “It’s just a game, Bob!”

**Broken China**  
*Otoe, Nebraska – Early March 1957*

Bob’s grieving spirit ignited into full-blown fury when he heard Maisy’s pronouncement, “It’s just a game.” A rush of rage and a fire of temper exploded. Within half a second, he was at the table in an attack on the china lying so quietly in its place.

Bob condemned Maisy for her lack of support and everything else while he dashed around smashing every piece of china onto the floor.

Maisy's emotion sparked from Bob's aggression, and she began to fling angry and spiteful words which had been bottled up for years. "Why don't you just destroy them all," she spat at him from across the room.

By then he was already at the kitchen cupboards, where he pulled each piece out and hurled it to the floor accompanied by a curse.

Maisy was up then, crying and swearing and beating on him like her life depended on it. She hit hard and he slapped harder.

They were on the floor then, on top of broken pieces, not feeling the blood, not seeing the harm. Bob took hold of Maisy's hair, ready to bang her head against the hardwood, when Pammy Sue and Bobby Mark jumped on him to try and hold him back.

But when little Kimmy Louise crawled onto her daddy's lap and put her dainty arms around his, he broke. A bundle of sorrow, deflated and drained, curled up in a heap.

## **Looking for Solace**

### *Otoe, Nebraska – Early March 1957*

Rising from the hardwood, Bob rushed to his bed and knelt in silent prayer, quiet tears draining from his closed eyes.

The anger was done, spent unfairly against family, with only exhaustion left. He crawled under the blankets and was gone.

Things were never the same after that. An opening had been made for the harm which enters a family from within. There was fear. There was remorse, but having acted thus once, it would be easier next time.

Instead of staying home to make up for the terrible incident with the china, Bob went in search of newspapers. He wanted to review the game and get a sense of how others viewed the calls that had led to the Otoe loss.

Doggedly, he went on his self-ordained mission. Would he find a sports writer brave enough or astute enough to address what so clearly was evident to Bob and every fan and player in Otoe?

Del Black of the *Lincoln Journal* wrote that the Wildcat defense in the first half was lagging and off balance. This allowed Verdon to score on several easy baskets. Verdon's defense against Otoe's Dick Steinhoff was superlative. In the semifinals, Steinhoff had tallied 34 points; but in the finals, the Trojan defense held him to five points.

Jack Andersen's article in the *Nebraska City News-Press* took issue with Coach Ihrig's gamble to play for the last shot. He chastised Otoe's poor defense and praised Verdon's strategy.

The *Lincoln Star* also flattered the defense of the Verdon Trojans, while the offense did what they needed to do. In the last quarter, the Trojan offense only scored one field goal, but went 6 for 6 at the free throw line. It was just enough to win the victory.

The articles diminished Bob. They left him feeling betrayed. Why was there no one to speak out against the crooked referee?

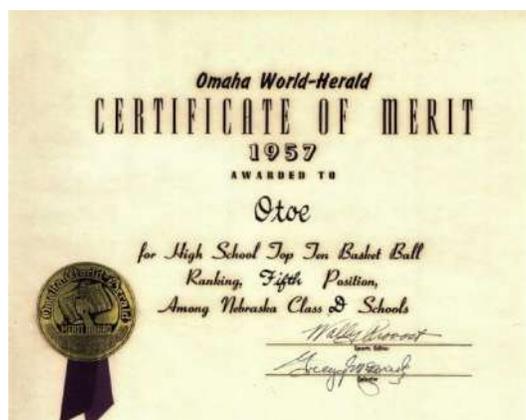
Ultimately, the loss was his fault as coach. Humbly, he accepted it and would need to improve.

## **Final Ranking**

### ***Omaha, Nebraska – Late March 1957***

In a world of boys' sports and its intense competition, a bunch of girls brightened the gloom.

Quirky and fun and totally off-balance in playing volleyball, the Otoe girls managed a respectable record of fifteen match wins with only seven losses.

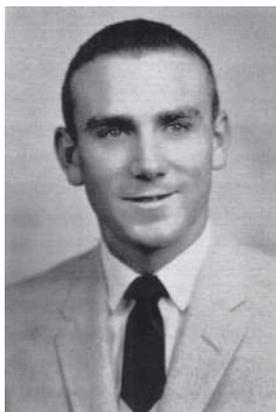


*Top Five Final Ranking*

By the end of March, the final basketball rankings were released. The *Omaha World Herald* ranked Otoe fifth. Their Class D record was 24 wins and 2 losses. For the two years Bob was at Otoe, the team won 48 games and lost 5.

It was far short of what Bob felt they should have done, and could have done, considering the talent he had inherited.

## **Two-Time All-Stater** *Lincoln, Nebraska – Early April 1957*



*Roger Witt – Otoe Wildcats All-Time Leading Scorer*

For the second year in a row, “Roger the Dodger,” Roger Witt, was named to the All-State squad. Last year Roger was selected to the Class E All-State team. And now, Otoe was Class D, and the honor was elevated.

It was all due to scoring and Roger's total for the four years was 2,132 points. It was a new record high for Otoe, and surpassed the brother Ron's record of 1,925 points three years earlier.

The 48 point total Roger scored in the Class D Regional Play-offs was another Nebraska record.

Roger ended his career as the second most prolific scorer in Nebraska high school basketball history. What an amazing achievement for a seventeen year old boy.

But Bob was full of regrets. How many times had he pulled Roger out to keep him from scoring so many points and making the Wildcats look like they were running up the score?

He should have been following the records. He should have found a way to support what Roger was capable of accomplishing. He should have known.

## **Somber Celebration** *Otoe, Nebraska – Late April 1957*

Folks were still grumbling about the last game and the ticky-tack fouls. But it was time for the yearly athletic banquet; and despite the depression about the lost game, the two hundred banquet tickets were quickly sold out, even with an increase in price to \$1.25 each.

Amidst long and somber faces, the townspeople mourned with the team in recognition of the end of the season, the loss of the game, the conclusion of Coach Ihrig's two-year leadership, and every other sorrowful thing associated with Otoe and the team.

The keynote speakers spoke in accolades of team and Coach. They had no personal sadness to air, and their words were nothing short of laudatory. Del Black of the *Lincoln Journal* and Jack Anderson of the *Nebraska City News Press* tried to deliver a shower of praise, but their words fell flat and lifeless.

Then one by one every player who lettered in basketball and volleyball was called to receive his or her award.

And last, the most worthy, was Roger Witt, Otoe's town hero, standing beside Coach, while he listed Roger's accomplishments. Applause and a standing ovation followed, yet still the dark mood prevailed.

It had started with Mr. Henry's opening remarks that evening. The owner of the Village Tavern had thanked the team, the Coach, and the town for their support. Their patronage had made these last two years extra special. He had ended his speech with – "The school board officially announced today that our school will be closing after next year. Say good-bye to the school spirit you have just witnessed."

## **Track and a Mattress** *Otoe, Nebraska – Late April 1957*

Schools equal work. Seasons move into new seasons and when one is done, another begins.

For the boys, track and baseball began and for the girls, softball.

Always eager to do more, Coach Ihrig signed up for a couple of track tournaments.

In the middle of the State was Kearney, Coach's alma mater, and host of an all-day track invitational, and Otoe's most important track meet of the season.

Maybe Bob could carve out some time to look up a few of his favorite professors at Kearney State Teacher's College, those who had helped him so much in his college days.

After all, one of the college magazines had just published a very favorable article lauding him as one of the top ten coaches to have graduated from Kearney State.

The day went well. The boys competed winningly. And at the end of a meal of Nebraska corn-fed beef, the boys and Bob checked in at the motel.

Sometimes young boys have an unending supply of energy, and so it was in the room of senior boys. A pillow fight turned crazy with feathers flying and boys jumping up and down until the weight and impact broke the bed.

Someone had to pay and that person would be Coach. The motel owner was angry and the boys tried to be remorseful. They weren't very sorry to the owner, but they knew they had disappointed Coach Ihrig. Bob had paid for the bed so he decided to take the salvaged items home with him.

Somehow, they hoisted the mattress and box spring atop the car roof, tied it tight, and off they went.

## Colorful Colorado

*Denver, Colorado – Mid May 1957*



*1957 Senior Graduating Class of Otoe High School*

Someway, Bob would need to gather physical energy and mental fortitude for yet another road trip.

It was time for Senior Sneak Day and the class sponsor, Mr. Ihrig, was responsible. Responsible for planning, driving, and chaperoning the ten Otoe seniors on a trip to Denver and the Rocky Mountains.

The day before departure, Dick Steinhoff came to tell Coach Ihrig he couldn't go. It was spring and his dad really needed him on the farm.

No way was Coach leaving him behind to work. No way would he let Dick miss out. So Bob went to see Dick's father and pleaded with him and went so far as to arrange for a couple of old guys to help Mr. Steinhoff while Dick went away for an entire week.

It was a wonderful time to celebrate the end of high school and their days together. They saw Buffalo Bill's grave on Lookout Mountain, Red Rocks Amphitheater, the Denver Zoo, and their first professional basketball game.

A week of memories and a happy ending for Otoe seniors 1957.

## **Packing and Regrets**

### *Otoe, Nebraska – Late May 1957*

With Bob and the seniors in Colorado, Maisey could devote her time to packing. It was dreadful, this in and out of boxes.

With the help of Jerry Gorton, the family loaded a work truck on loan from a Clatonia farmer, and made ready to head west.

Bob was saddened by what he perceived to be his failure as a coach. The Wildcats should have been in the state basketball tournament. There were mistakes he had made and he could point to each one.

- 1). His own confrontational attitude toward the referees did no good.
- 2). Running up the score led to bad feelings in opponents and gloating in his own team. Never again would he allow a team to score over a hundred points.
- 3). His game plans needed improvement. A strong defense was the way to go. He

would take the example of John Penney of Verdon who had mastered the skill of a tenacious defense.

- 4). He had been too close to his players. He should have pushed harder, both physically and mentally, and demanded more.
- 5). If it had been up to him, he would have started a football program, but it had been out of his control.

He looked at Coach Ollie Mayfield and the legacy he had left at Alvo. He had won a state title in football. It could have been Otoe who held the state basketball trophy. But, sadly, no.

Nevertheless, Bob recognized goodness when he saw it. The boys had made a pact to keep silent about what actually happened after the final game. They wouldn't and didn't talk about the referee who had it out for Roger Witt. With 27 seconds to go, they could have won, and they all knew it.

Responsibility. Decency. Honesty. Dignity. The boys gave these things to Coach, and he would try and carry them on.

## **LEAVING OTOE**

### *Otoe, Nebraska – Early June 1957*

Bob was ready to go. There was still a measure of pride in what he had accomplished, but it was time to say good-by.

It was natural for Jerry Gorton to help with the move. He had even been a babysitter for the four Ihrig children.

Coach Ihrig approached Jerry's parents about their son moving to Clatonia with the family. He could help with the children and Jerry could be the senior starting guard in basketball, with the potential of winning a state title.

It was Jerry's decision, the Gortons declared. They were taken by surprise at Coach's offer, but recognized a possible benefit for Jerry. Ultimately, he would decide to stay home.

Bob drove the truck with Jerry beside him. Maisy drove the Dodge with the four children in tow.

The car tires turned over the crunchy gravel while Maisy mouthed, “If I never come back to Otoe, it will still be too soon.”

## **Village of Clatonia** *Clatonia, Nebraska – Early June 1957*



*Maisy sitting on her new front porch with Taffy and kittens*

A bit over an hour later, they rattled over the Rock Island railroad tracks which ran north to south and entered Clatonia in Gage County.

The village was comprised of a few more than 200 inhabitants, and lie south of Lincoln and north of Beatrice.

The Ihrigs stayed on Nebraska Highway 41 and found the tavern, grocery store, filling station, bank, post office, and barber shop, serving also as a beauty salon. There was a depot along the tracks with huge grain bins alongside, and a few simple churches scattered among the village streets.

Zion Lutheran stood by the highway in the countryside heading west to nearby Wilber, just seven miles into the next county. With a population of 1500, it was the county seat of Saline County and famously known as the Czech Capital of Nebraska, with their annual Czech Festival, boasting the best Koláče in the country.

Knowing the scarcity of houses for rent, former Coach Gene Else had helped secure a rental for the Ihrig family, so they pulled up at the corner of North Oak and Jefferson.

The large two story framed house stood ready and inviting with its wraparound porch and an apricot tree in the back yard. If Maisy hadn't been so dog tired, she might have even smiled.

## **Coach Gene Else** *Clatonia, Nebraska – Early June 1957*

Usually, the new coach comes in and has to figure everything out himself. Usually, Bob was on his own.

But Coach Gene Else cared about the team and school he was leaving. But he was worn out, tired of sleepless nights and the strain of pleasing the parents, the town, and the team.

The Clatonia Cardinals had been ranked in the top ten nearly all year, entering the district playoffs with a 19 win 1 loss record.

When they entered the playoffs, most the town thought they would win districts, regionals, and head for the state tournament in Lincoln.

In the semifinal game of district play, Clatonia had been defeated by Hickman, a team they had easily beaten earlier and a team they should have handily won over.

The team and the town had been crushed and Gene Else blamed himself and his own failing.

The team required conditioning and Coach Else needed a better defensive plan. Those two areas Else urged Bob to work on.

When the *Omaha World Herald* summarized the standings, Clatonia came in number ten, with 20 wins and 2 losses.

It was very good, but not good enough – not for either coach.

## **Top Hats**

*Clatonia, Nebraska – Late February 1957*

While Coach Else had been blaming himself, his players blamed themselves. First, for losing in the semifinals; and second, for their poor attitudes.

They had let success go to their heads, and went so far as to buy matching top hats to wear to the games.

As it so often goes, confidence morphed into cockiness, and it eventually brought them down.

Embarrassed by their loss in the second game of districts, with humbled hearts, the boys had vowed to come back stronger the next year.

Ceremoniously, they had started a bonfire in the middle of downtown. When the flames burned high above them, they tossed their top hats into the fire.

## **Peru State**

*Peru, Nebraska – Late February 1957*

The Clatonia players had grown up through the years with Coach Else. Everyone loved him. His expertise was fundamentals.

But he couldn't do it any longer. It was clear. As the team had returned home from districts, Oren Miller, the starting Cardinal guard, had rode beside the Coach in the front seat. There had been tears in Coach's eyes.

Hard for the Coach. Hard for a young boy to see.

Eventually, the boys came to realize they'd be getting a new coach, one whose team was playing in the regional playoffs at Peru State.

An idea formulated and the boys hatched a plan to go and see their new coach.

The Clatonia boys had arrived early, bought their tickets, and clambered up into the bleachers, to find an observation spot to see Coach Bob Ihrig.

What they had witnessed that day seemed to be to them the direct opposite of Coach Else. Their beloved coach sat quietly during games, calmly giving directions from the bench.

Coach Ihrig was up and down the sideline, pacing, pointing plays, and screaming signals. He was not afraid to yell at the refs and he appeared to be exerting more energy than the players themselves.

The Cardinals had left Peru that day in silence, uncertain as to how next year would play out, but determined to give it everything they had.

## **Apricots and Ice Cream** *Clatonia, Nebraska – Mid August 1957*

Football in the fall was more than just a Friday night lights pastime. As far as Bob was concerned, football was conditioning for basketball.

The Clatonia school board had agreed to add football, but there was the matter of money, so they agreed to subtract baseball. As far as Bob was concerned, it was good, so long as they could initiate spring track and keep the boys active and in shape.

Like all summers in Nebraska, it was sweltering hot and Maisy enrolled the two older children in swimming lessons. After only a few sessions, Bobby Mark was confident enough to dive off the edge of the pool and broke his collarbone. And that was the end of that.

Then Kimmy Louise spiked a temperature of 105 and landed in the hospital in Lincoln.

No one had time to deal with broken and hot children; least of all the father, who grew more impatient with every day their child was in the hospital.

Bob's focus was football – ordering uniforms, equipment, and laying out the new field behind the school.

But soon, the world righted itself, and there was just enough time for a party before the start of school. Coach Ihrig invited the village of Clatonia to the new home with the apricot tree. Homemade ice cream and apricot desserts supplied by Maisy fed the people while the smiling Coach provided the social atmosphere.

Needless to say, Bob became the new VIP in town and hope was born again.

## **Clatonia School**

*Clatonia, Nebraska – Mid August 1957*



*Clatonia School – Elementary, Junior High, and High School*

Like so many schools, the Clatonia School was a two story brick building, with a large wooden staircase directly inside the double front doors leading to the imposing superintendent's office to the right of the second floor landing.

There were 201 students from Kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, with most coming from the surrounding farms. Four teachers handled high school, which included a music teacher for band and choir and glee clubs. Three teachers handled the grade school. Then a custodian worked full time, along with two cooks.

With only ten total staff members, it meant that Bob was superintendent, principal, teacher, and coach.

A lot of work, a lot of responsibility; and hopefully, a lot of fun, especially in the area of basketball.

It had become Coach Ihrig's favorite sport.

## **First Football Team** *Clatonia, Nebraska – Mid August 1957*



*Clatonia Cardinals First Football Team*

Money struggles were a constant state in small schools, so Bob felt fortunate that the board had agreed to a football program. But unfortunately, he spent the entire year's budget for one sport and they would have to make do with what they already had for all the rest.

It was worth all the worry, though, when Coach passed out the new jerseys and pants, the shoulder pads, thigh pads, the hips pads and helmets. The boys were elated and eager to get going.

After instructions from Coach Ihrig, the team donned their striking red and white uniforms, laced up their cleats, and pulled on the helmets. There was a correct way to put this all on and Coach wanted no injuries. After all, they'd be wearing them a lot during these next weeks.

Passers-by on the gravel highway witnessed a string of bobbing red-striped, white helmets jogging in the heat of the day on the side of the road, headed for the Zion Lutheran Church for a run before practice.

Full gear, full throttle and the driving, determined Coach, easing his Dodge behind the troops with his hand on the horn to make sure the boys moved forward.

## **Complaints**

### ***Clatonia, Nebraska – Mid August 1957***

Two miles a day in blazing August heat, dressed every day in full football gear, was enough to get the attention of the boys' parents.

Three hours every afternoon was a grueling workout. It was also time away from the land, the livestock, and the late day milking. These boys were farm hands after school and Coach Ihrig's regime was not being very well received by the Clatonian farmers.

Some of the boys complained that practice was worse than boot camp, not that they knew anything about boot camp.

Some of the boys hid in a ditch along the road out to the church. Some of them hitched a ride on a flatbed tractor trailer. And some of them just up and quit.

But most of the boys went along and understood the plan that football was part of pre-conditioning, the preparation for the main event.

In Clatonia, as elsewhere, roundball was king.

## **Practice – Practice – Practice**

### ***Clatonia, Nebraska – Late August 1957***

Repeat, repeat. Repeat, repeat. Every difficult workout; every brutal task. Three, four times. Coach Ihrig bellowed: "Do it again!"

The August heat. The field – to call it such was ludicrous – it was as hard as a rock, topped with weeds and sandburs, and not one blade of grass. The bare spots were home to millions of stinging red ants, ready for the next boy to come landing in a heap atop their meticulous home.

Coach yelled and screamed and cussed and cursed. The constant tirade cut like a knife. He called the boys “gutless welts.” He told them they had a yellow-streak a foot wide running down the length of their backs.

“I heard that Clatonia has some good athletes, but I haven’t seen one yet.” Either Coach thought that berating players was beneficial; or perhaps in his state of ceaseless anger, it was just what came out of his mouth.

But it would change on a dime and the light in his eyes and the soon-to-be bright smile told the boys what they were really worth and carried them forward and through the coming next explosion.

Coach directed plays from the middle of the field, instead of out of the way on the sidelines. He wore football pants packed with the usual thigh pads and cleats on his feet. He lined up behind the quarterback in a plain white cool undershirt and white towel draped around his neck.

At that vantage point, he was the running back, and he daringly challenged the players to take him down. Cradling the handoff, he rushed through the line with his knees pumping high.

Coach looked around to find the one who might take him down. “Weaklings!” At them he scoffed.

An unlikely hero, 116 – pound 5’8” junior, Tom Heller, came rushing through the line and brought Coach down hard by grabbing his lower legs. Tom did it again; this time resulting in the coach getting a bloody nose.

Momentarily shaken and angered by the onslaught of so small an opponent, the coach glared at the young and bold boy. Then he grinned and clapped Tom on the back with a welcome of sure placement on the starting team.

## **Starting Quarterback**

*Clatonia, Nebraska – Late August 1957*

The blocking sled was nearly immovable, built of metal that felt like steel and the immovability of an army tank. From the coach's platform on the sled, Coach Ihrig stood erect bellowing himself hoarse.

“Sissys!” “Knock me off!” “C’mon!” “Get your fat feet moving!”

Strength. Conditioning. Learning the game. Building a team.

It wasn't hard to choose a starting quarterback. It was an obvious choice.

Senior Rodney Sagehorn had experience as a leader. He was the oldest of six children and lived and worked on the family dairy farm. He was strong, tall, and athletically gifted.

Rodney's father Johnny somehow found time to watch his son play sports, and had been in attendance at every basketball game since Rodney was in second grade.

Johnny had seen the basketball team run out of steam last year, so he supported Coach Ihrig's hard style of coaching intended to bring about a higher level of conditioning.

Johnny came to some of the football practices; and therefore, was a first-hand witness to the measured improvements being brought to pass.

Rodney was smart and cool under pressure. Coach spent extra time with the new quarterback, drilling him on plays and options.

The basement at the school was home to the coaching office where Coach and Rodney worked on strategies.

Rodney had seen Marine drill sergeants on TV, and he thought his new coach was like a buzz-cut military boss. But Rodney was a bit surprised about Coach's ashtray. It was overflowing with Chesterfields. To put out a cigarette, Bob thrust it against the sole of his left shoe and if there was more than an inch left yet to burn, he would save it carefully on the ashtray lip.

And so grew an alliance – Coach, quarterback, father and friend.

## **Buckets of Lemons**

*Clatonia, Nebraska – Late August 1957*

It was a new school, but the same rules applied here as before: 9:00 curfew on weekdays, do homework, go to bed.

If the boys were out and about, Coach would surely find out. He was out and about, too, driving the streets and alleys to make sure he didn't discover players doing what they shouldn't be doing after curfew. Coach had no mercy; he called the homes to check on the boys, "Is so and so doing his homework tonight? Let me speak with him."

If a boy broke curfew, it was 100 laps around the gym. When a couple boys together broke curfew, the entire team did the laps. Coach made everyone accountable for teammates.

Coach Bob put on his cleats and walked on the players' stomachs and backs, attempting to strengthen muscles and core, while urging the boys to eat red meat and plenty of it.

As before, Coach withheld water during practice and games. Instead, the boys could suck on lemons. The cooks in the school kitchen sliced lemons into buckets ready for Coach, ready for practice, ready for games.

It was thought that water slowed an athlete down; but instead, it made them sick and many felt dizzy, some vomited on the sidelines and became even more dehydrated.

It seemed cruel and extreme and a few of the parents went to the school board: "This coach needs to go!"

## **Game One – Football**

### *Clatonia, Nebraska – Early September 1957*

There were rules for everything – even for the national anthem. Hold your helmet with your left hand alongside your erect, at-attention stance, with your right hand over your heart. “Is your jersey tucked in?”

The first game was against Elmwood where they had played football for several years. Elmwood had won over Otoe in basketball the previous year and Coach Ihrig would never forget that loss.

The men at the entrance collected a quarter from each attendee; and before long, the rough field was surrounded by cars and pick-ups, headlamps on.

Someone has arranged for concessions and a small makeshift bleacher and Clatonians arrived on time.

Coach Ihrig stalked the sidelines, burning up some of his pent-up anxiety, but really only stoving the flame inside. His focus was the next play, the players, the logistics. All the while, Bob jabbered to the team, to the officials, and to himself. “What the hell is going on out there?”

In the end, the Cardinals lost the opener, but just by two, 12 to 14.

## **Working for Uniforms**

### *Clatonia, Nebraska – Early September 1957*



*Students of Clatonia and Coach Bob Ihrig working in a milo field to raise money for new basketball uniforms*

In order to be successful, every coach needs to plan ahead. What's coming up? Do you have what you need for tomorrow, next week, and a month from now?

Coach Ihrig assessed the approaching basketball season and found himself digging through the jumbled storage room at the gymnasium.

The old basketball uniforms looked bad and smelled worse. Bob couldn't coach a team whose players dressed so poorly, but he knew better than to ask for funds for new uniforms. So he and a few of the boys went before the school board to get approval to raise the funds themselves.

The goal was \$750.00. They would find the time to do farm work for some of the farmers whose crops had been damaged by high winds and heavy rains. The boys would help harvest milo and bale hay and be paid minimally for their hard labor. As superintendent, Bob labeled the work as part of the school's vocational agriculture program and they moved on to the goal.

Athletes armed with corn knives, pocket knives, and butcher knives hacked and whacked at fields of milo. They carried the cut grain in baskets to load onto a farm wagon and moved to other fields to bale hay.

Senior girls organized their own efforts and brought donuts, hot dogs, and soda pop to feed the hungry boys.

When the farmers were paid at market, a small payment was returned to the team; and slowly, the goal was realized.

Nearby in Beatrice, Nebraska, the sports editor got wind of the uniform project. Mr. Al Riddington brought his camera and tripod and set up for a photo shoot to capture the activity going on in the countryside of Clatonia. Riddington's rather lengthy complimentary article appeared exclusively in the *Beatrice Daily Sun*.

But no amount of positive press squelched those who wished for Coach Ihrig to be fired. Some of the farm work was being done during school hours. And the football practices were too long. And the boys were being worked too hard.

In front of the school board, Bob was summoned. The powers that be urged Coach Ihrig to lighten up; and so he promised.

Yet nothing really changed.

## **Yutan Chieftains** *Clatonia, Nebraska – Mid September 1957*

It has been three years since Bob had started the football program in Yutan. The boys from Yutan gathered around their old coach and talked about other times. It was going to be interesting to see what the Chieftains could do tonight. But Coach's loyalties obviously were with Clatonia. Still, he would never make an allowance that his current team had no experience.

It was a blowout, an embarrassingly poor excuse of a performance by the Cardinals, especially after how hard the team had worked.

The record stood Clatonia 16, Yutan 50. And Coach blamed it all on mental mistakes. He would not even talk about winning. Not that night, not ever. That wasn't the point. It was the fact that the boys lost focus. They weren't prepared to deliver a one hundred percent effort; not their best.

It's what infuriated Bob.

## **Winning Attitude** *Clatonia, Nebraska – Mid October 1957*

Two early losses equated to a lack of motivation. It just wasn't there, and no amount of screaming and yelling, or practice and conditioning could put that keen sense of desire to win into the souls of those boys.

But the losses mattered, and day by day, player by player, the boys came around. They listened. They learned. They practiced. They improved.

By the time the Cardinals met Honey Creek, they had begun to jell. The win: 39 to 12.

By the following week with Ohiowa, they began to show some solid performance. The win: 53 to 2.

By the next week with Malcolm, they showed good defense. The win: 12 to 6.

Could it be called a winning streak? Against Firth with a win: 33 to 24.

For so young a team, for so inexperienced the players, four wins and two losses was praiseworthy.

But just wait. How quickly do the mighty fall.

## **Bennett Aces**

### *Bennett, Nebraska – Late October 1957*

Another cardinal rule – don't look back. If you gloat on past wins, you're likely to lose your focus.

The Cardinals traveled to Bennett to play against the Aces. They lost their mental edge. Clatonia became flustered and in the end came home with a loss and final score of 31 Bennett, 14 Clatonia.

The caravan of cars stopped at the school to unload pep club members, cheerleaders, and players. Coach Ihrig took the team inside to run laps in the gymnasium.

Around and around the boys jogged, and each time they passed their coach, there was a lashing, a reprimand to never lose focus, never to take any opponent lightly.

No one complained. One hundred laps counted by one angry coach.

## **Moonshine**

*Clatonia, Nebraska – Late October 1957*

After the gym-jogging hundred-lap event, more complaints about Coach Ihrig streamed in. But he was not going to change the way he did things, especially when he knew he was right.

It would have taken a tough-skinned person not to feel the sting of disapproval from those who disapproved. Those who wanted him fired. Bob pushed sadness and stress aside and went in search of support.

To local merchants, to general residents, to a few parents of players, to grandparents of students, anyone who listened and gave him a minute of time, they tasted Bob's charisma. And sometimes the most unlikely person becomes an ally.

One such ally was the manager of the train depot. He was easy to talk to and there never seemed to be anyone else around. So Bob and he sat and spent some time, and shared stories until the old man pulled out his stash.

Behind the depot, alongside the tracks, the two men swigged the station master's moonshine. They smoked and sipped and Bob found some much needed comfort there.

## **DeWitt Panthers**

*DeWitt, Nebraska – Early November 1957*

Never giving in, the team ran to the country church and back to school in full gear every day. Coach followed in his car, honking madly. They went through each play four or five times. Practice makes perfect, right? No! Only perfect practice makes perfect performance. Blocks had to be perfect. The handoff had to be perfect. Running through the hole had to be perfect.

This week, more than ever, practices were of the highest importance. How else could they win over the DeWitt Panthers, Clatonia's main rival?

On Thursday at practice, Coach walked out onto the field in his workout attire showing off what he had painted on his clean white tee shirt – “DeWitt Star.”

It turned out to be the most brutal practice of the season. For three grueling hours, Coach Ihrig lined up behind Rodney Sagehorn, took the handoff, and ran through the line taunting the offensive lineman: “Come on you weaklings, block for me, damnit!”

He challenged the defensive players: “Tackle the DeWitt Star, you sissies.”

Coach never let up.

When practice ended at 7:00 the boys were battered and bruised. Coach was battered and bruised, too. He hobbled down to his basement office and crumpled into his chair from sheer exhaustion.

Rodney went down to look in on his coach. He found him bent over, crying from the pain he had inflicted on his fragile body.

On Friday, a quietly subdued team rode the nine miles south to DeWitt where they would take on the Panthers of DeWitt. The small stadium was packed and loud to greet the boys from Clatonia.

Despite the hostility, the Cardinals performed well under pressure and came away with an impressive 21 to 6 victory.

Still in pain, Bob went to bed as soon as they returned home.

## **Injury Report**

### *Lincoln, Nebraska – Early November 1957*

Football is a game of pain. Little injuries help players develop a tolerance for pain; and eventually, practicing and playing through the pain of football results in fewer basketball injuries.

In Otoe, Coach Ihrig had learned that the lack of football conditioning had led to injuries during basketball, thereby hampering the team down the stretch.

The DeWitt game had been a victory, but it came with a price. Junior running back AlDean Blome had been carried off the field.

Bob had taken AlDean to Lincoln where he received the best possible care from George Sullivan, one of the trainers at the University of Nebraska. AlDean was diagnosed with a slipped disc in his right knee. He would be out for several weeks and after that, he'd wear a protective pad to the injured knee.

AlDean had come from a country school to the bigger school in Clatonia. He was often overlooked as an athletic star because he tended to approach sports without a lot of fanfare. And he looked rather bookish, wearing glasses and his unassuming air.

But he was a natural athlete and was projected to be the starting guard on this year's basketball squad. Coach would do anything to make sure AlDean was ready to play.

## **Garry's Sporting Goods** *Lincoln, Nebraska – Mid November 1957*

Bob walked the familiar few blocks from the University campus to Garry's, the downtown sporting goods store on "O" Street. He had found not only a supply source for whatever sport he needed, but also a back room of other coaches playing cards and drinking coffee.

The coffee was free and the camaraderie was priceless. Where else could Bob have met all the noteworthy coaches from the University and elsewhere? The advice flowed freely, but what worked for some wouldn't necessarily work in Clatonia.

He had already used some of this own money for a down payment for new basketball uniforms. As always, his team would be dressed for success. The money the boys earned paid for the balance and the final custom work was in progress.

On one of the trips to Lincoln for AlDean's treatment, Bob picked up the new uniform, stowing them secretively in the trunk, to be revealed to the team at just the right time.

## **Final Football Game**

### *Clatonia, Nebraska – Mid November 1957*

The last football game came quickly enough and Bob thought about how a record of 6 and 3 would look so much better than one with 5 wins and 4 losses.

Every game mattered and every play of every game mattered and Clatonia had one more chance to shine under the lights on Friday night.

The Cardinals looked like they had been playing football for years against the Dunbar Wolves. Oren Miller intercepted a pass and raced 57 yards for a touchdown. Then as halfback, he passed for another six points. Rodney Sagehorn ran the ball in for one touchdown and added another six points on drop kicks after touchdowns. Tom Heller made the final score after a 55 yard run.

It was a praiseworthy last game – Clatonia 36, Dunbar 13.

For those who keep track of statistics, in their first year of football the Cardinals gained a total of 216 points, and their opponents made 151. Of those 151 points, a third came from Yutan in the second game of the year.

And so the season came to an end.

## **Legacy vs. Expectations**

### *Clatonia, Nebraska – Mid November 1957*

For the most part, the village people were glad that football was over. After all, basketball took top billing in Clatonia, as it did in other small towns in the rural countryside.

From the sheriff to the mayor and to every citizen, basketball was their heart, and it had been beating, actually pounding – for years.

The people knew the game – the rules – the strategies. They knew the players and the beloved and departed Coach Else. But they did not really know the new coach. The only other thing they knew was what they wanted; and that was a trip to the state tournament in Lincoln.

In truth, Clatonia had seen their strongest basketball presence in the 1920s, when the team had played seven times in the state tournament. Three times, they had been in the finals and once they were crowned champions in 1922.

Then at the beginning of the Great Depression, in 1929, the Cardinals had made it to the state finals for the last time. Then World War II had come, and there had been little to cheer about for Clatonia in basketball.

At the end of the war, there had been a revival, and the residents had made the decision to build a new gymnasium. Money and materials had been in short supply, yet somehow through donations and actual manpower supplied by the citizenry, the job had been completed.

The new gymnasium was constructed of concrete blocks and had a tile floor since wood had been so scarce. There were two restrooms, a concession kitchen, and a brand new fancy scoreboard.

As it turned out, using tile for flooring gave Clatonia a distinct home court advantage. It was hard and slick and took some getting used to.

For thirty years, there had been no basketball glory in Clatonia until Coach Else had brought the team to within one point to gain victory over Hickman in district play. So close, but failure had reigned.

There were but two weeks before the start of basketball and Clatonia hopes were rising yet again. There were four returning starters and a team in superb physical shape. Expectations were high yet simple: coach the team to a trip to Lincoln and play in the state tournament.

## **First Basketball Practice** *Clatonia, Nebraska – Mid November 1957*

Part of Bob's job as he saw it was to play down external expectations and never to discuss winning or the state tournament.

Focus on here and now and it was time once again to position a folding chair at each corner of the gymnasium. This would be how they did things in Clatonia, just like in Otoe, and around the perimeter the boys ran one hundred laps. "Don't cut corners!" To any cheater who cut a corner, twenty-five laps were added.

A scorekeeper tallied the laps and there was no stopping until they were done.

Everyone ran; everyone worked hard. The second string team was as important as the starters.

Everyone did the next thing which consisted of a series of stretching calisthenics, designed to strengthen legs and arms, body and mind.

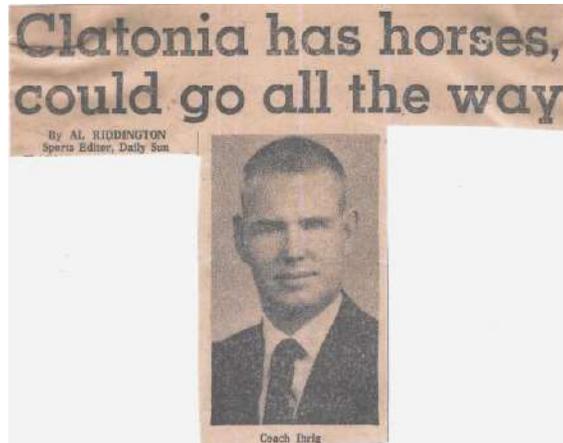
And then came learning to correctly tie their basketball court tennis sneakers. Coach told the players there was a right way and a wrong way; and the latter might result in an injury.

This was how Coach Ihrig did things. Never let up. Drive with the highest level of intensity you can muster.

He built up and he tore down. And he called the boys “sissy girls,” “candy asses,” “momma babies,” and “poor sumbitches.”

Then he smiled and promised to see them come morning.

## **Media Coverage** *Clatonia, Nebraska – Mid November 1957*



*Glowing article in the Beatrice Daily Sun*

No sooner had basketball practice began, and Al Riddington from the *Beatrice Daily Sun* published a laudatory article about the Clatonia Cardinals.

The article went on and on and Coach Ihrig knew that when the boys saw it, it wouldn't do them any good.

### **Clatonia has horses, could go all the way** **By Al Riddington, Sports Editor *Beatrice Daily Sun***

Clatonia – The high school gym here was a beehive of activity the other evening as Clatonia unwrapped its Cardinal roundball squad.

Although fans were still talking about the proud record in football just completed, a 6-3 record which was impressive since it was the first time for the sport in the school's history, thoughts have already switched to the roundball sport.

And the word it out – there is a dandy chance that Clatonia and Coach Bob Ihrig will bring cage laurels to Gage County as well as the Clatonia community.

A pre-season study of the Redbirds adds up to one thing – Clatonia is on the threshold of producing a state champion in the indoor sport.

Last season, under the expert coaching of Gene Else, now county ASC office manager, the Cardinals won 20 of 22 games, including the championship of the MUDECAS and Gage County tournaments.

This year under the mentorship of another top-rated coach, fans will want to keep a close watch on the Clatonia squad. Coach Ihrig came to Clatonia from Otoe where his roundball club compiled an impressive 23-2 mark, and until bumping into touch luck was picked to win a state crown.

But this season Coach Ihrig will be just as well heeled in cagers, if not better, than when at Otoe. To spearhead the Clatonia drive for the goal of being state champs in Class D, will be two veterans, Rodney Sagehorn and Oren Miller.

Both cagers will be after their fourth “C” in basketball, Sagehorn, all-county and all-MUDECAS choice last season, should land an all-state berth at the close of the season.

Miller, a 6-2 senior, proved to be a real rebounder last season, and paired up with Sagehorn, also a 6-2 senior, will give Coach Ihrig a couple of aces.

The Cardinals will boost a well balanced and rangy starting five if all pans out as expected. Coach Ihrig, if he wishes, can select a starting five against Ohioa in the opener, that will average better than 6-2 per player.

The “big boy” of the team, a two-year veteran, in Ron Miller, a 6-5 senior, who last year steadily improved and should this season be a “jackpot” cager for the Cardinals.

Bob remembered Otoe and the top hats and what could happen if the boys let this go to their heads.

But the team seemed grounded, focusing on practice and perfecting performance.

## **Dog Days of Fall** *Clatonia, Nebraska – Late November 1957*

Blowing into his umpire’s whistle, Coach Ihrig signaled whenever the players made a mistake. The boys truly tried their utmost, giving little thought that practices were becoming more and more intense.

Swinging a wooden yard long measuring stick, Coach orchestrated the moves the boys should execute, and woe to the one who missed direction because the stick may come down on him.

“Do it again!”

“Do it again!”

“Do it again!”

No matter what the boys were practicing, they did it over and over again.

Coach put a smaller rim on top the basket, thereby forcing more accurate shots, but ultimately leading to rebound drills.

Even before the first snowfall, Coach told the players to bring their galoshes. The heavy metal clasps and rubber boots were clumsy, but when the boys wore them in practice, their legs grew stronger and their balance increased.

The scrimmages were dogged. The starters were made to play against each other; and sometimes they played together. Other times, Coach put eight players on one team to challenge the other side.

The boys just went along with his demands, happy to have direction, working hard, and playing together.

## **Special Team**

### *Clatonia, Nebraska – Late November 1957*

You can't coach height. The God-given gift of altitude had been bestowed on most of the boys playing in Clatonia; or in the very least, the gift was given to enough of them to give a clear advantage to Coach Bob's newest team. There was a depth of good talent, and they had been well-coached in the basics of basketball by the previous good coach, Gene Else.

The team was hard-working, uncomplaining, and determined to obey every order the coach laid down. He was their brand-new role model.

The boys just assumed their coach was a talented athlete, and they would never find out that he wasn't.

Any sport requires stamina and Bob would always fall far short. His heart couldn't do it. The vessel was solid, the motor was frail.

## **Personal Grudges**

### *Clatonia, Nebraska – Late November 1957*

Never mind a weak heart, Coach Ihrig possessed a sharp mind, keen memory, and overpowering will, and his observational skills told him this team was going to fail unless they put their personal jealousies aside.

It was only natural for people to think of Rodney Sagehorn as the star of the team. He was the best shooter from his forward position. But wasn't he getting preferential treatment?

Oren Miller was right up there in points scored. He was the best at passing, dribbling, and rebounding. He also had the ability to set up plays and make everyone around him better. Oren was a silent leader to his comrades and everyone counted on him.

Still, some players felt these two were getting most of the attention.

Bob knew that Rodney and Oren were like glitter and glue. Without the glue, there would be no glitter. It would take the two together, working on their mutual goal. And moreover, it would take everyone playing together to be a winning team.

The boys better learn this lesson quickly because the season was about to begin.

## **Teamwork in Coaching**

### *Clatonia, Nebraska – Late November 1957*

What better example of teamwork could the boys witness than their old coach visiting ball practice, and the new coach gladly receiving him?

Coach Else had promised to help Coach Ihrig and he delivered on that promise. He showed up after his new job on occasion and worked with the offense that he had set up. And the new coach accepted the help.

While Else's offense was being installed, Ihrig concentrated on defense.

There was a one-year window of opportunity to win a championship utilizing the talents of the boys in front of the coaches.

Coach Else volunteered his time and wisdom to the team he loved and had built up. He was an unpaid assistant and difference maker for the 1957-58 Clatonia Cardinals.

## **Looking Sharp** *Clatonia, Nebraska – Early December 1957*



*Tom Heller modeling his new uniform to family*

Coach Ihrig had found a way to put the team in new uniforms and it had become the way he coached. Looking sharp was part of successful performance.

The week before the first game, the uniforms came out.

There were red tops for home games, white for away. Never before had there been a warm-up outfit – jacket and long pants.

Pure white and cardinal red, the colors were true and bold. Stripes formed a “V” for victory on the chest with five white stars above the lines. “Clatonia” was stitched in tackle twill on the back sailor collar – all this on just the jacket. A white stripe ran down the length of the pants. Another two stripes flanked the playing jersey at the top right and running to the left waist. The player's number was dead center above the stripe.

Most teams wore cumbersome belts at the waists of their shorts, but Bob's choice for Clatonia was wide comfortable elastic, nothing to bind or constrict. The red shorts were trimmed in white and of the popular length – short, very short, made for free movement and to show off long legs.

To complete the total pizzazz were knee high socks, in red and white stripes, running horizontally around all those pair of sturdy legs.

The boys were proud – proud and sure of themselves and ready to go.

## **Nickel and Dime Coach** *Clatonia, Nebraska – Early December 1957*

The will to win is not enough. The will to prepare to win is what it takes. And Bob was willing and able to take the advice of General Douglas MacArthur.

After practice every night, the players worked on free throws. If they made ten free throws consecutively, they could go home; otherwise, it was fifty shots apiece from the free throw line, while Coach Ihrig tallied every successful shot.

In Otoe, when a player missed a free throw in a game, Coach collected a nickel. In Clatonia, it would be a dime. Apparently, the stakes were higher, or maybe Bob realized that it was at the free throw line where games are won or lost.

The missed basket money was dropped into a kitty jar on Coach's desk. When the local media sources caught wind of his rule, they dubbed him the “nickel and dime coach.”

Bob begged the school cooks to prepare a special meal for the boys before games. They graciously agreed. Then he begged local farmers for eggs, pork, milk, and butter.

The cooks made poached eggs, ham, and toast before each game, home and away. Protein for what was needed, but nothing heavy or sweet.

Bob had served under General MacArthur and it was only natural that he soaked up some of his philosophy: “There is no substitute for victory.”

How to get to victory – now that’s what Bob had to figure out.

## **Opening Night** *Clatonia, Nebraska – Early December 1957*



*Clatonia Cardinal Cheerleaders L to R: Diane Ulrich, Leora Schachenmeyer, Virginia Sagehorn, Janet Steinmeyer*

Straight west of Clatonia lay Ohioa, home of the Bulldogs, who came the 45 mile distance to be the opponent for the home opener for the Cardinals.

The gymnasium glowed under bright white lights illuminating the shiny tile floor, and walls covered with signs of support displaying the creative talents of every high school girl.

Twelve pep club members and their mothers popped popcorn, filling enough bags to satisfy the craving of students, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, alumni, and townfolk.

Girls volleyball began at 4:00, followed by the junior varsity boys basketball, and then the main event – high school Cardinals boys basketball. What had started in second grade and had been brought to blossom under Coach Else was now under full review.

Time to play ball. They had waited long enough. Let’s go!

## Starters

*Clatonia, Nebraska – Early December 1957*



*Starting Five: AlDean Blome #33, Oren Miller #15, Ronnie Miller #11, Rodney Sagehorn #25, Harley Bergmeyer #35, Coach Bob Ihrig*

The scorekeeper and the announcer had the best seats in the crowd, with at least room enough for comfort; everyone else was pressed into four rows of bleachers with hardly an inch to spare.

The announcer welcomed the noisy public and turned to cue the pep band for the playing of the national anthem. They did their best to do the song justice while every right hand crossed every left heart and every hat came off.

Imagine the humdrum voice of the announcer introducing the Bulldog starters, and the change of tone when he called out the hometown team.

“The starters for your Clatonia Cardinals begins with the big man in the middle. Wearing #11 and standing six feet, five inches tall – Ronnie Miller. At 6’2” and wearing #25 is the leading scorer from last year’s Cardinals – Rodney Sagehorn. The other forward and team captain and playmaker, also at 6’2” and wearing #15 – Oren Miller. In the backfield and starting guard is #35, Harley Bergmeyer at 5’9”. The other guard is the only junior starter. At six feet one inches tall and wearing #12 – Bobby Sykes.”

Sykes was playing in place of the injured AlDean Blome. Sykes could play both forward and guard and he was ready to go.

Let's go!

## **Candy Stripers**

*Clatonia, Nebraska – Early December 1957*

The noise was deafening. The sounds from the crowd resonated along the long wooden pine planks which lined the walls of the gymnasium.

Bob was ready. He was nervous as hell. His hands gripped his knees when he bent over in the huddle at courtside. Then he glanced at the two men who would be behind his seat for the game's entirety. Gene Else was in position. Everyone was glad to see their beloved Coach. And everyone already knew he was helping at practices. To Gene's left sat Johnny Sagehorn, his booming voice ricocheted off the ceiling rafters above the tile floor.

The unplanned seating arrangement for the three men would be the same all season.

Most of the time, Coach Bob paced the sidelines, never quite getting rid of his nerves. In reality, the pacing seemed to fuel the intensity.

At certain times, Bob sat in his spot and Gene whispered in his ear. The previous coach's demeanor and level-headedness served to calm the unorthodox new coach.

The boys ripped off their warm-up gear just seconds before the opening tip-off at the center court circle.

The hometown crowd cheered proudly in thunderous applause.

The Bulldog crowd sneered, jeering and pointing fingers at their opponents: "Clatonia looks like a bunch of silly candy stripers."

That's all it took. "Candy Stripers" became the new derogatory nickname for Clatonia, and it stuck all season.

Truth was, it was like blowing on a fresh fire.

## **Opener**

### *Clatonia, Nebraska – Early December 1957*

Indeed, the insults kindled a desire in the boys to perform well, to prove any critic wrong, to make their families proud.

Indeed, it was only a matter of doing what they had been practicing. Lightning-quick and super-strong. Discipline and teamwork led to an early lead.

And indeed, after an all-out first eight-minute press, the Cardinals were ahead at 22 to 8.

It was the socks. To watch them was mesmerizing. Red and white stripes were in constant, graceful motion until the half-time buzzer sounded, and the scoreboard announced 49 to 15.

The starters began the third quarter, then retired to the bench while their comrades took the court. This action was greeted with a flurry of boos from the hometown crowd.

Gene Else and Coach Ihrig agreed that when the lead was well in hand, to set the first team down thereby reducing injuries, giving the second team a chance to develop. Experience in playing time was invaluable. Besides, to run up the score was not a good idea. Bob had done it in the past and it had come back to bite him. On the other hand, Coach wanted to avoid keeping the games so close. Narrow margins put him in a state of anxiety. He liked being ahead of the other team by double the point value. That seemed to be a fairly comfortable lead in most cases.

It was a happy ending that night. Ronnie Miller was the top scorer with 23 points, with the two forwards not far behind.

Game 1: Clatonia 77 – Ohioa 37

(Rodney Sagehorn 22, Oren Miller 16, Ronnie Miller 23)

## **Hated Rival**

### *Clatonia, Nebraska – Early December 1957*

“I hope every opponent calls us ‘silly candy stripers.’ If that doesn’t challenge your manhood, nothing will!” At practice, Bob delivered his version of inspiration with passion.

Friday was coming soon and the Cardinals were scheduled against their long hatred rival, the proud Panthers of DeWitt.

There were times when the bigger town south of Clatonia had humiliated them both in basketball and volleyball. Clatonia wanted revenge and they wanted it now! The Panthers would be on the Cardinals home court and the boys could hardly wait.

To some in Clatonia, the citizens of DeWitt acted as though they felt superior. Perhaps it was because they were home to Petersen Manufacturing, a large plant which employed hundreds of people from miles around.

William Petersen, a Danish immigrant and blacksmith by trade, invented the first locking pliers in the 1920s. He sold his handy tool from the trunk of his car to farmers and townsfolk in nearby villages. The vise-grip was so useful that eventually they were sold throughout the world and yet still made in this small part of Nebraska. But the success of the Petersen tool didn’t mean that DeWitt should be mean to Clatonia or other nearby towns.

Clatonia was out to prove they were better than DeWitt. And from the start, they were better. The volleyball girls won, and so did the junior varsity boys. But the hardest part was yet to come.

Earlier in the week, Coach Ihrig had called Al Riddington in the hope that if he were to complain about his team being called “candy stripers,” it would stir up a story from the sports editor of the *Beatrice Daily Sun*. If the editor asked that Bob’s team not be called “candy

stripers” by their opponents, then that’s exactly what would happen, and it would stir up the Cardinals.

DeWitt took the bait, and with one voice, the Panther visitors began to chant the derogatory moniker.

The reaction from the Cardinals went exactly as planned. They raced out to a lead in the first quarter – 32 to 1. The defense stifled the Panther offense and they couldn’t even manage to get the ball across mid-court. The Cardinals soared to 46 points before the Panthers managed to score again.

When Coach put the second string in early in the third quarter, the hometown crowd booed. Clatonians wanted to see “100” on the scoreboard in lights, but there were not three spaces.

Confusion drifted through the audience as the winning team fans wondered why Coach was holding back. And he would probably never tell them.

Game 2: Clatonia 89 – DeWitt 21

(Rodney Sagehorn 30, Oren Miller 20, Ronnie Miller 16, Harley Bergmeyer 10)

## **Favorable Schedule** *Clatonia, Nebraska – Mid December 1957*

Tuesday next the Sterling Maroons arrived in town with one of the best players in the state. Larry Rathe was a high scoring forward and propelled his team to a first period lead at 15 to 14. It was the first time all year Clatonia was behind.

But not for long. Rodney Sagehorn and Oren Miller took charge and never looked back. Rathe’s 24 points were noteworthy, but not enough.

Game 3: Clatonia 73 – Sterling 52

(Rodney Sagehorn 33, Oren Miller 20, Ronnie Miller 16)

On Friday, still at home, the Ravens from St. Joseph's in Beatrice came calling. Any hope of winning that the Ravens harbored was quickly dashed when even at the midway point, the Cardinals were well ahead – 59 to 18.

When Coach stripped the bench, the Clatonians voiced their displeasure, but Coach stood firm.

Game 4: Clatonia 90 – St. Joe's of Beatrice 41

(Rodney Sagehorn 24, Oren Miller 17, Ronnie Miller 16, Bob Sykes 11)

Five straight home games concluded the December schedule and the Firth Wildcats were the final contest before Christmas.

AlDean Blume was permitted to play after his injuries and he joined his team to bring in another win.

It had been a favorable schedule for the Cardinals. Five up. Five down. The holiday break began.

Game 5: Clatonia 68 – Firth 27

(Rodney Sagehorn 27, Oren Miller 21, Ronnie Miller 10)

## **Holiday Break** *Clatonia, Nebraska – Mid December 1958*

It was winter vacation for academics, but not for sports. The school was locked tight and the furnace thermostat was set to cold, but the gymnasium was unlocked, the heat poured out, and the boys were latched in. They ran and shot, dribbled and passed – everything to prepare for two of their toughest opponents in January.

Coach Ihrig pushed and demanded and nit-picked, then pointed out every single mistake in every single game, even though they had won every single game – handily.

Coach believed that sometimes talk is cheap, so he'd demonstrate his objectives. He would jump in and play, showing what to do and how to do it.

Ronnie Miller was the starting center and showed great ability, but he was a bit skinny and needed more muscle. When the opposing teams had begun to rough Ronnie up a bit, Coach would pull Ronnie and put in Bob Gerdes, the big, burly, red-headed, backup center.

But the Gerdes kid was timid and faint-hearted, and much too soft. His spirit didn't match his size. Finally, during practice one day Coach lost his temper. "You piece of gutless wonder, what the hell are you afraid of?"

To prove a point and display on court what he wanted the big farm boy to do, Coach backed into him, and spiked a sharp elbow that made target too high, finding contact with Gerdes' nose. Then came the blood, freely flowing and eliciting a pouring out of emotion.

Suddenly, the meek boy became a forceful man and erupted on the coach. Bob Gerdes stormed out of the gym, screaming "I quit," and arrived at home with a face full of blood, and a heart full of spite.

Mr. Gerdes demanded that his son go back and apologize immediately. There would be no quitters in the Gerdes household.

Of course Coach welcomed the big kid back and it became the beginnings of a close bond between Coach and player.

Big Bob Gerdes made a positive contribution all season. He had learned his role quite well – a bull of a kid in candy stripe socks.

## **Clara's Visit**

### *Clatonia, Nebraska – Christmas 1957*

From McCook came Grandma Clara. From Holdrege came sister June and her husband Bud, and their children, Scott and Dixie. It was going to be a rare full family Christmas.



*Around the table: Dixie Warner, Bob Ihrig, Kimmy Louise, Clara Miller, Pammy Sue, Scott Warner, Bobby Mark, Maisy, Roger Royal*

Bob's mother Clara didn't drive, always afraid to get behind the wheel, so her brother Dennis brought her. And poor Bud was tired of driving, spending all day, every day for the last how many years delivering bread for the Debus Bread Company. It was probably time for a new job and a new town but for now they were close enough for a visit, so they determined to come and celebrate family.

As grandmother to these six children, Clara became queen of the Ihrig clan and every grandchild worshipped her. Like most women, it was much easier to be a grandmother than to be a mother.

The smiles Clara gave to her children and grandchildren were not transferred to her children's spouses. Maisy and Bud were from the beginning disappointments. Maisy never felt welcome in Clara's home and Bud knew Clara had tried to talk June out of marrying him. So Bud didn't like his mother-in-law much more than she liked him. Bud had always been a friend to Bob and he could see how Clara had treated her son – on one hand nagging and niggling at him; and on the other, doting and solicitous when he was sick. Clara cherished Bob, not June, and that irked Bud.

Other than her own son, Clara had a poor opinion of men, or so it seemed to Bud, given the fact that she had been twice divorced.

In an attempt to entertain his mother, Bob suggested she come to watch basketball practice in the afternoon. It would be fun for her to meet the boys, and he could observe their interaction; but no, she wanted nothing to do with the sports she felt were killing her son.

So in part to avoid more conflict with his mother, Bob went to the gymnasium. There he was in control – practice for the boys in basketball and command of his own world. It consumed him.

## **Johnny Sagehorn**

### *Clatonia, Nebraska – Late December 1957*

Every once in a while Bob thought about his father, yet even at Christmastime, the memories were not pleasant. He had seen his father only a few times since junior high. The visits were rarities and any gifts to Bob and June were few and far between, though sometimes there had been a bit of money Carl had sent with which Clara bought clothes.

Mostly Bob was angry at his father, so he tried not to think about him. It was better to keep busy; and sometimes, circumstances present people who filled gaps. And for Bob, that father-figure was Johnny Sagehorn.

Known by folks from around the area as “Johnny,” the energetic and outgoing dairy farmer was well-respected and appreciated for his good sense and hometown charm. At times he was outspoken, but his booming voice announced what was true and right.

He showed up the very day the Ihrigs had moved in to Clatonia, and offered help along with some neighbors to carry in beds and tables and chairs. All the while he worked, Johnny talked – about basketball and what the coach should expect from area opponents.

Then he had showed up at football practice, and he never missed a game, home or away. From forever, Johnny had attended the basketball games. The Clatonia Cardinals seemed to be Johnny’s responsibility, and he supported the new coach, even when early on some had thought

Bob should be fired. He had sensed that the new coach had an arsenal of tactics that the team needed and so it went.

The Clatonia Cardinals had been one of the most dominant small town basketball teams in the 1920s and when Johnny reached a decade and a half, he became part of the reason for the Cardinals' success. The red and white were regulars at the state basketball tournament when Johnny was in high school; and now with his own son playing, the game was even more thrilling.

But it wasn't just a game for Johnny. Basketball was a strategy, a system, a scheme. When he watched the Cardinals lose in district play the year before, he had an inkling that maybe Coach Else didn't have what it took to get this team to the top. From 1910 to the present, Johnny's loyalty never wavered and with his oldest son to be here now was utter joy.

## **The Sagehorn Farm** *Outside Clatonia, Nebraska – Late December 1957*

Eighty acres of pasture held nearly forty milk cows and the twice a day chore of milking knew no rest on the Sagehorn farm.

One hundred sixty acres was allocated for crops to feed livestock and Johnny Sagehorn planted corn and wheat and alfalfa to supply the need.

The tightly-knit family worked together and ate together and sat around the table talking about basketball in the evening.

With Johnny stopping in at practice, it was only natural for Bob to eventually show up at the farm where the conversations about basketball and opponents never lagged. Trusting Johnny came easy for Bob, and it wasn't long before he loaded up the whole Ihrig family for an outing on the farm.

Rodney was the oldest and he worked alongside his father. Jerris was next oldest, a popular busy junior in high school. She had already become the official Ihrig babysitter. Norlynn in fifth grade was projected to be the next great basketball star in the Sagehorn family.

The three little ones came next. Sherrill was in the third grade and became best friends with Pammy Sue who was in second grade. Bobby Mark paired up with Randy in first grade. Kimmy Louise and Roger Royal and the Sagehorn baby Deb matched in age, but hadn't developed play together skills at their young ages. Nevertheless, the families meshed.

Even the wives took up together. Lois Sagehorn was easy going but kept her large family in line, on task, with care.

It wasn't easy on the farm, especially with no indoor plumbing, except at the kitchen sink. The aluminum tub came out on Saturdays and the little ones took turns bathing in the kitchen.

The Ihrigs had been used to modern facilities in town, so the outhouse was cold and daunting especially in winter. Still it was worth the inconvenience, because they were all friends.

Oftentimes Maisy ended up in the Sagehorn kitchen. She was not afraid of hard work and cooking didn't seem to be much trouble, even at someone else's house. As Lois watched Maisy, she must have worried a bit because Maisy smoked continually, so much more than she had ever seen anyone else smoke – even Bob and her husband.

Lois knew about Maisy's drinking, but there was no drinking at the farm. No whiskey. No wine. Not even any beer. And somehow it was good and the friendship grew.

There was no drinking at church either. Johnny and his family traveled seven miles to Hallam to the Church of Christ, but the Ihrigs never attended. It wasn't what Bob did growing up, and he didn't need it now.

## **Presents and Parties**

*Clatonia, Nebraska – Late December 1957*



*Holiday Card Playing Parties in Clatonia*

Christmas and holiday festivities kept days from getting too dull in the bleak winter.

More and more the three little Sagehorns played host to Pammie Sue and Bobby Mark and it seemed there was always plenty to do on the farm.

An ancient wooden bridge was situated close to the farmhouse and under its rafters the older Sagehorns had hung cigar tins for all sorts of treasures. The bridge was a convenient hiding place for children who imagined their parents had no clue where they squandered so many long hours.

The cigar tins had a dual purpose and were also used as targets for Randy's BB gun. Over and over the friends shot and reloaded, reloaded and shot, until something different would spark their play.

Around the farmyard, the Sagehorns climbed behind the wheels of first, the creaky old tractor, then the run-down stick-shift pickup. As confidence gathered speed, Randy putzed along, nearly tipping the jalopy over on a nearby hill.

Sherrill pulled out the tape recorder she had received at Christmas and the children frittered away hours hearing their own voices on the silly device. The boys got bats and balls and baseball cards. The girls received slick new ice skates.

Being older than Bob and Maisy, Johnny and Lois seemed to be content having the Ihrig children at the farm while their parents went out alone together. There were young couples in town to socialize with and the Sagehorns made it possible.

In the dead of winter the socializing involved eating and drinking and playing cards.

Bob thought of Ollie Mayfield often and how he and Opal had formed lifelong friendships in Alvo over a card table; and maybe he and Maisy could do the same.

Couples took turns hosting card parties on winter Saturday nights which included a meal. Then cards and partying until two or three in the morning. They were a drinking crowd, though not nearly as serious about it as Maisy was; and for her, she wished the card playing entailed putting some money on the table, but that never happened.

Some of the couples had already made reservations for New Year's Eve at the Legion Club in Beatrice. It was the popular spot for fine dining, drinks, and dancing. So Bob and Maisy would join the gala and the arrangements were set.

Back at the farm, the girls prepared to try their new white skates. Lois warned Sherrill and Pammy Sue against going to the creek, but off they went, edging to the bank. Inexperience won. Sherrill fell down, and Pammy Sue fell through.

Fortunately, the creek was shallow there, so Sherrill pulled her friend out, and they slogged home, where two wet girls met the angry and worried mother. Lois blamed herself as most mothers do, and dreaded telling Bob and Maisy. But the outcome could have been worse, and it's a wonder they all survived.

## **Trip to the City** *Omaha, Nebraska – Late December, 1957*

“Ask your parents for permission to go to Omaha for a scrimmage game.” Coach Ihrig made the order.

What? Who are we playing?” – the boys wanted to know.

Without one iota of qualm, Coach described their opponent. Omaha South, the largest Class A school in the state, had nearly 3000 students.

Many of the team had been to the south Omaha stockyards where livestock was bought and sold. Profits were won or lost. Fathers and grandfathers went there with money matters weighing heavy on their minds. Lots of risk, some rewards.

The humongous stockyards gave rise to nearby packing plants. South Omaha was more than a bit rough, with men coming from everywhere to find jobs and money. With all the working men, there were all-day-all-night saloons and women, and someone coined the phrase “Magic City.”

The industry brought families and when Omaha South High School began in 1887, the founders named their teams Packers.

## **Bus Blues**

### *Omaha, Nebraska – Late December, 1957*

For the Cardinals, it would be the first away game of the season, though not an official game as such. Nevertheless, Principal Cecil Carlson readied the big old yellow bus, and the team and Coach Ihrig met at the school well in advance of when they would have needed to leave. The bus had a governor on it, which never allowed the driver to push it past fifty miles an hour.

Driving to Omaha would seem like taking a slow boat to China.

The bumpy, rattling drive put Coach on edge even though it was only a scrimmage. It was enough to help Bob decide that this would be the last bus ride of the season. What if the old rattle-trap broke down and they would be driven to forfeit a game?

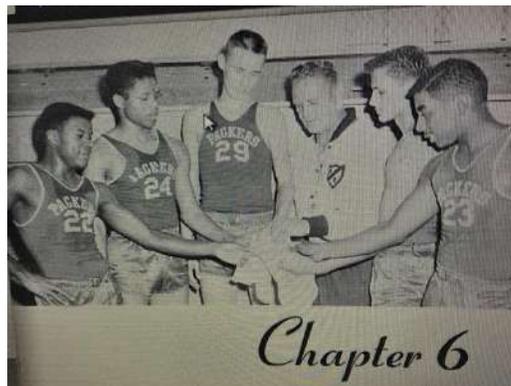
They would go by car in a caravan for the rest of the season. And that was that.

The first two teams, ten boys, stared out the windows when they entered the city limits and passed the imposing stockyards. They stared at the people in the streets of the neighborhoods, and when Coach turned in his seat to check on the boys, he realized that some of his boys had never seen a Black African American before now.

To a fully rural Clatonia team, playing in this urban world felt incredibly uncomfortable. When the bus shuddered to a stop, the boys didn't make a move. Omaha South High was the largest building many of them had ever seen.

The eager anticipation when they had boarded the bus in Clatonia had been totally replaced by intimidation. Too bad the bus hadn't broken down.

## **Omaha South Packers** *Omaha, Nebraska – Late December 1957*



*1957-58 Omaha South Packers Starting Five L to R:  
Don Scarborough, Larry McClinton, Bill Vincent, Head Coach Cornie Collins, Claude Thomas, Joe Hollingsworth*

Coach Cornie Collins, Bob's friend and mentor, met the Clatonians at the doors. After the last timid boy passed sheepishly over the threshold, Mr. Collins locked the front entrance.

He led the way to the gymnasium where they peaked through the heavy double doors to see the largest basketball court they had ever seen. The bleachers could accommodate thousands, more than everyone who lived in Clatonia plus three or more surrounding towns.

Coach Collins backed up into the hall and directed the boys to the locker room, all the while apologizing for the lack of janitorial service for the day. It would mean no showers after the scrimmage. None for either team.

In other words, it was going to be a truly unauthorized, undercover scrimmage arranged by the two coaches, a semi-common practice as long as nothing went wrong.

The halls were dark and frightfully long and every door was locked. What was all the mystery?

By the time the boys were suited up and ready to go, the Omaha team was already warming up.

If the place itself was not fearful enough, the opponents certainly were. The center for the Packers was the tallest human they had ever seen. He towered above everyone at 6'8" or 6'9". How could they compete against that?

Under their warm-ups, the Cardinals wore white jerseys, the away uniforms. The Packers wore faded red jerseys and no warm-ups. Maybe they owned some; maybe they didn't. Or maybe they felt this wouldn't be the game to dress up for.

From the Packer huddle, came a demeaning drawl: "So, these are the famous candy strippers..."

## **“Spinnin’ Vincent”** *Omaha, Nebraska – Late December, 1957*

To an onlooker, the Packers, though ranked in school numbers as Class A, didn't look the part. The Cardinals, in their bold warm-ups, looked like Class A, but that wasn't the case. The sharp uniforms belied their true status as the underdogs, with a Class D ranking.

Jeering at the visitors through the glass of the gymnasium doors were hoards of African American kids, making angry faces and trying to strong-arm the small-town boys. And it was working.

Cardinal guard Harley Bergmeyer tried to lighten up the cold atmosphere: “Come on guys; obviously, we ain’t in Nebraska no more!” It was not working.

Second teamer, Jim Heller, had been stoved up all morning. When he put it together and figured out who the Packer center was, he became even more worried.

It was Jim Vincent whose photograph had appeared in print on the sports section front page in the *Omaha World Herald*. At 6’9”, the sophomore was still growing. The writer predicted that if Vincent kept improving, the Packers could win the Class A State Championship.

The writer had compared Vincent to “Wilt the Stilt” Chamberlain who played basketball for the Kansas Jayhawks. Vincent’s new nickname, “Spinnin’ Vincent”, was coined by the writer and adopted by Packer fans.

The Cardinals had never felt so out of their realm. Why would Coach have arranged such a game as this? It was sure to be a disaster.

There was no option but to play, and it was minutes before the opening tick, so off came the warm-ups. When the Packers got the full view of the Cardinal uniforms, one of the African American boys called out: “Love the socks, man! Love those socks!”

## **“Just a Scrimmage”** *Omaha, Nebraska – Late December, 1957*

Full-on in black and white, two referees stood ready at center court.

At the scoreboard controls sat another official, who had run the numbers hundreds of times. When the seconds ticked off, he pushed the buzzer announcing the start of the first period.

Coach Ihrig had done his best to reassure the boys. “It’s just a scrimmage. Enjoy it, fellas!”

When you’re surrounded by giants, it’s hard to relax. Three of the Packer starters were African Americans, and the Cardinals didn’t know what to expect. Within seconds, though, the Clatonia boys realized they sweat and grunted and shouted the same; and so, it was just a game after all.

Tall Vincent was impossible to stop. The other Packers lobbed him the ball, and he’d drop it in.

No one even noticed there was no noise from the empty stands. The shoes squeaked on the hardwoods. The coaches yelled. The officials blew on their whistles.

Two teams from two different worlds. It was a thrill of a game – a chess match back and forth on the echoing court. And as far as anyone was concerned, what was happening out in South Omaha was shut out and turned off.

The Cardinals maneuvered quickly among the tall Packers because they had been working on conditioning. A couple times the Packers could be seen bending over with their hands to their knees.

Yet they were ahead, but only by one.

At the half: Omaha South Packers 30 – Clatonia Cardinals 29.

## **Words**

### ***Omaha, Nebraska – Late December, 1957***

Words can spark a fire that can leave the speaker scorched. Words can get out of hand during the heat of a game, and when the Omaha boys kept taunting Clatonia about their “candy striper socks,” they mocked them once too often, and it worked like a shot of adrenaline into the souls of their opponents.

One audacious Packer asked the small town team if they really meant to come in and beat them. Shyness aside, Rodney Sagehorn piped up: “Damn right we’re trying to beat you! Aren’t we keeping score?”

The attitude of Omaha seemed evident: How dare you dumb farm boys come here and mess with us, the mighty and great boys of Omaha South?

Push had come to shove, and the Packers’ words had come to vanquish any remaining Cardinal fear. It was now a matter of pride.

## **Play for Pride** *Omaha, Nebraska – Late December, 1957*

The heart of a champion is filled with team loyalty, respect for teammates, and honor. Honor for school and town and state.

The Clatonia boys already possessed these characteristics, but it was Coach Ihrig’s goal to sharpen these traits, and he knew it would all end in winning.

## **Test of Endurance** *Omaha, Nebraska – Late December, 1957*

The teams played more aggressively in the second half than they did in the first. They played contentiously. They played tough, close defense. They hustled, contested shots, and moved every arm and leg to block the passing lanes.

Spinnin’ Vincent spun and shot, merely standing on tiptoes to make a basket and score. He was a bit like Clatonia center Ronnie Miller who needed more muscle and meat on his bones.

The score shifted from one side to the other and by the time the third quarter closed, it was Omaha South Packers 48 to Clatonia Cardinals 45.

Strong Bob Gerdes bulled Vincent most of the game, and the tall kid showed signs of wearing out. His teammates were looking that way, too.

A quarter to go in an unofficial game that would not be recorded.

## **Coach Collins** *Omaha, Nebraska – Late December, 1957*

The Packers stalled. Their passes looked sloppy. Clatonia intercepted and raced down to score.

Momentum shifted. Clatonia had energy; they had depth. They kept running.

Then a couple scrappy bench Packer players gave some spirit, so back and forth it went.

With less than two minutes in the game, Clatonia took a two-point lead.

Vincent called up some energy and tried another shot, but missed. A Packer reserve caught the rebound, then just held the ball doing nothing. Oren Miller was guarding and he swiped the ball, breaking it loose, and another fast break and a four-point lead.

On the next Packer possession, the reserve replayed his move. He caught a rebound and seemed to freeze. Oren knew what to do and knocked it out of his hands again. The lead mounted to six.

The time clock ran down. Omaha South's pace slowed. They were sapped and it showed when another long shot missed its mark, but the reserve caught the rebound a third time and bought the ball to his knees.

At that point, Coach Collins had had enough – enough of pressure, enough of his own players, enough of the small-town skinny candy-stripers. Without even calling a time-out, he ran over to the rebounder, hollering as he went. The instructions came forth amongst the curses.

The reserve must fake three times, then shoot, exploding into the air and coming down with a basket. Coach Collins man-handled his player all the while spelling out the strategy of rebounding in exact and explicit detail.

The Clatonia boys had never heard anything like it. Even Coach Ihrig's language paled by comparison.

Then it was over.

Omaha South Packers 60 – Clatonia Cardinals 66.

**“Let's Go! Now!”**  
*Omaha, Nebraska – Late December, 1957*

After the final buzzer sounded, there was dead silence. No talking, no cheers, no band, no nothing.

Both teams stood facing one another, expressionless and awkward, waiting for direction from their coaches.

Bob had already ordered Cecil Carlson to bring the bus around and park it at the front doors midway into the fourth quarter. The bus was unreliable and with the way things were going and the volatile nature of Coach Cornie Collins, Bob wanted a quick getaway.

Embarrassment for losing, guilt for winning, anger at a loss, uneasiness at being in an uncertain atmosphere, the boys were getting restless and fidgety. Time for the coaches to shake hands and head their teams to the locker rooms.

Bob pressed his boys to grab their clothes and coats. They could change in the bus.

“Let's Go! Now!”

**No Publicity**  
*Omaha, Nebraska – Late December, 1957*

It took a long time for the bus to warm up and after the heat generated in the gymnasium, it was too cold to change clothes. The boys pulled their warm-ups on, donned their coats, and covered themselves with their clothes.

They had exhausted all their energy, both physically and emotionally, so it was going to be a quiet ride home.

But Coach Ihrig had something to say. He told the team how proud of them he was, how special they were, and he hoped they had learned something about themselves from this scrimmage. Then he told them to keep it all in proper perspective. They wouldn't talk about the scrimmage again and there wouldn't be any publicity about it.

The scrimmage was merely practice and Coach didn't want a repeat of what had happened in Otoe when the newspapers had learned that the Wildcats had nearly beat Omaha South. It had become a huge distraction; and that, they didn't need. If the press found out that the Cardinals actually did win over the Packers, it would have become a bigger bother.

No publicity, and that was that!

## **Calling Bud** *Clatonia, Nebraska – December 31, 1957*

Bob worried about his friend, Cornie, and how he had reacted during the game. It was only a scrimmage, after all. Win, lose, or tie, a practice game was a good barometer of a team's overall footing. And sometimes a loss is more valuable than a win, because it reveals what is lacking.

The scrimmage that morning had been like a race between two thoroughbreds, running neck and neck until they came to the finish line when one horse got *flustered*, who became *fearful*, lost his *focus*, and *faltered*.

A champion overcomes all *four* of these pitfalls.

Bob's work going forward was to keep up the team's stride in physical form, improve their mental toughness, and make sure the boys stayed out of trouble.

For now, though, it was New Year's Eve, a celebration of the past year, an evening to unwind, and take Maisy out for an adult soiree. They would dress to the nines and forget the pressures of children and work, and the burdens of managing a family budget on a meager teacher's salary.

Even making a long distance phone call became a consideration as to the lowest possible rates to take advantage of evening and holiday discounts. Bob wanted to talk with his friend and brother-in-law, Bud, and share the news about the scrimmage – the victory over Omaha South.

There was a bit of bragging as he announced Clatonia Cardinals 66 – Omaha South Packers 60. Bob voiced the confidence he had that if he could keep his team focused, they might make it to the state championship. He dared not speak those hopes to anyone else, but wouldn't it be epic if Bud could come watch them in the finals?

## **Sprague-Martell Central Panthers** *Clatonia, Nebraska – January 3, 1958*

Oren and Ronnie Miller both had the flu. They had been sick since the game in Omaha, but Coach needed them.

“Suit up, anyway!” Coach Ihrig ordered. They could sit on the bench that Friday, the first week of January. They'd be the back-up plan if needed against Sprague-Martell Central.

The schools from Sprague, Martell, and Centerville had consolidated decades before, giving them a constant supply a student athletes.

In the first quarter of play the Cardinals went ahead of the Panthers at 20 to 8, with AlDean Blome accounting for eight of Clatonia's points. The Cardinals success came mostly at the free throw line during the first half.

Throughout the rest of the game, the Cardinals performed solidly and never underestimated their opponents.

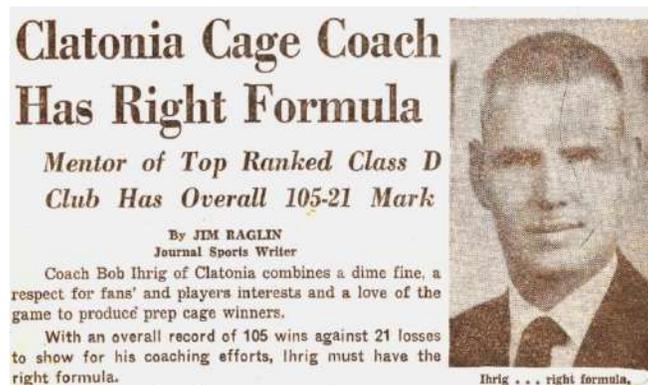
## Game 6: Clatonia 69 – Sprague-Martell 58

(Rodney Sagehorn 21, Oren Miller 12, Ronnie Miller 19, AlDean Blome 13)

Bob worried that Clatonia would meet the Panthers again soon in the MUDECAS tournament. The sports writer from the *Beatrice Daily Sun* predicted the teams would see one another in the finals.

Having just won over Sprague-Martell Central, Clatonia could be facing them again in a rematch. That may turn out to be a dangerously revengeful contest.

## Clatonia Cardinals #1 *Clatonia, Nebraska – January 7, 1958*



By Tuesday, the *Lincoln Journal* printed their first-of-the-year basketball rankings.

Sports reporter Jim Raglin interviewed Bob and wanted to find out what the “dime fines” were all about. In his article he praised the coach for his success at Venango, Alvo, Yutan, and Otoe. From west to east, a few small towns in Nebraska had benefited from having Coach Ihrig lead their teams.

The dime system used by Ihrig has accounted for much of his past success and is working well at Clatonia. The coach “fines” a player 10 cents for every missed free toss in practices and games.

“We only had 11 chances against Sprague-Martell last Saturday, but hit 9. So far we are shooting 78 percent on free throws and 54 percent from the field,” says Ihrig.

Whatever loot the missed charity tosses bring is used for a post-season feed. Ihrig hopes for a bean dinner.

“If we get enough for steaks, it will mean we have missed far too many free throws,” he concludes.

All Ihrig teams have featured a fast break, high scoring offense.

“The fans like that kind of game and the kids do, too. So do I,” Ihrig stated.

#### CLASS D and E RANKINGS

1 – Clatonia (6-0)	1 – Tobias (4-0)
2 – Red Willow (6-0)	2 – Ong (6-0)
3 – Center (7-0)	3 – Bryon (4-1)
4 – Sprague-Martell (6-1)	4 – Hampton (9-1)
5 – Herman (6-1)	5 – Upland (5-0)

Bob studied the rankings. He made note of Tobias, an upcoming opponent; and of course, Sprague-Martell would likely be an upcoming tournament finalist.

Then there was Red Willow. It was a relatively small, yet significant, country school along the curve in the highway between McCook and Indianola.

The Red Willow Zephyrs had been a powerhouse in Class D for years and Bob knew them well while he grew up in McCook. In 1957, the Zephyrs basketball team had performed so well they had earned a place in the state tournament in Lincoln, but had lost in the first round.

Wouldn't it be thrilling to meet Red Willow in Lincoln at the state tournament?

## **Car Caravan** *Prague, Nebraska – January 7, 1958*

The first of the year official road game would be in Saunders County, where baseball reigned supreme. The highly ranked Cardinals would caravan to Prague, directly north of Lincoln.

Here were the rules for traveling, for presentation to another school as guests and visitors. New uniforms were one thing, but first impressions were equally important. The boys were to show themselves in dress pants, ties, clean and pressed shirts, and polished shoes. Coach had commanded it. Also, no conceitedness, boisterousness, over-confidence, and certainly no disrespect.

All these measures were a part of fairness and respect that Coach preached about and the boys believed and obeyed.

After the boys finished their special meal in the cafeteria, they piled into the cars parked in a long row, lining the length of the school.

Parents, teachers, pep club members, cheerleaders, boosters, and students assembled with the team to form a caravan of cars heading for Prague.

The parents had been planning this for months. It was all designed for support of the team; but moreover, there was strength in numbers.

With out-of-towners parked outside a school where a serious contest for superiority was being played out on a basketball court, it wasn't a bad idea for a group of men to guard the parking lot to prevent a possible outbreak of vandalism against the property of the team who might be winning over the home team inside the warm gymnasium.

## **Prague Panthers**

### *Prague, Nebraska – January 7, 1958*

Everything about meeting the Prague Panthers made Bob nervous. Prague already had five noteworthy wins, with only one loss. Two Panthers consistently scored in double digits and the scouting reports looked like danger ahead.

The Cardinals toted a number one ranking which now must be defended for the first time. They had just had two notable emotional wins, even if one was only a scrimmage. There were bound to be some mental traps for the boys and Coach Ihrig gave them fair warning.

Any jitters on the Cardinals' part quickly vanished as scornful shouts came from the Panthers who called their visitors by their new-age title – “Candy Stripers.”

From the Cardinal supporters came another shout. Their boys were dubbed the “Runnin’ Redbirds,” and that night they were *running*. They led 20 to 7 after the first quarter, and by half-time, the score was 50 to 20. Rodney Sagehorn had contributed 22 of those points.

For half a period in the third quarter, the starters played, then sat down while the second team took over. The younger guys gained experience while it boosted their morale and strengthened the over-all program.

But the supporters in the stands didn’t like it and booed the move which to them seemed like giving up. When would they see that hundred-point game?

Game 7: Clatonia 87 – Prague 51

(Rodney Sagehorn 27, Oren Miller 21, Ronnie Miller 21, AlDean Blome 11)

## **Death Changes Everything** *Clatonia, Nebraska – January 9, 1958*

Two days after the win over Prague and one day before the anticipated game with the #1 ranked Class E Tobias team, an unexpected death came to town. In small places, there is pain when one goes down; and when she is a young mother, it’s especially sad.

Delma and Lloyd Schernikau were farmers and their three children went to school in Clatonia. Delma kept her leukemia diagnosis quiet; and when she entered the hospital over the holidays, she never returned home.

Bill Schernikau was a senior, and was the oldest child. He played basketball and had had an exceptional junior year with speculation of him earning a starting position at guard; but understandably, with his focus on his mother, he had remained on the Cardinals second team.

Basketball practices continued minus Bill until the day of the funeral. The boys and Coach Ihrig cancelled practice the day of the funeral, dressed in their Sunday best, they shuffled down the aisle at church to sit behind Bill.

## **#1 Ranked – Tobias** ***Clatonia, Nebraska – January 10, 1958***

Terry, Larry Vonderfecht, and Paul Heller had gone through Coach Else's basketball training and as freshmen, they were as skilled as some players on the second team.

When Terry Koch became Bill Schernikau's temporary replacement, it was a big deal. Imagine a freshman playing varsity at Clatonia.

The newspapers built up the game between Tobias and Clatonia to be one that should not be missed. The Clatonia gym would be bursting and spectators had better show up early, or they wouldn't get a seat.

The warning never matched the hype. After the first period, it was 17 to 2; and by halftime, Clatonia was well in control at 32 to 7.

Rodney Sagehorn scored 26 points in the first half with his left hand in a splint from having his fingers slammed in a car door the day before. Coach set him down at half to rest and reduce swelling.

Early into the last half, Coach set down the rest of the starters, ignoring the boos from the crowd who wanted more points.

Game 8: Clatonia 67 – Tobias 31

(Rodney Sagehorn 26, Oren Miller 15, Ronnie Miller 10, AlDean Blome 11)

## **MUDECAS Tournament** ***Beatrice, Nebraska – January 13 - 18, 1958***

MUDECAS means Music, Declamatory (drama and speech), and Athletics. In cooperation with the Jaycees organization, MUDECAS had been giving awards for music, speech, drama; and of course basketball since the 1930s.



*Beatrice City Auditorium, Beatrice, Nebraska*

The annual MUDECAS tournament was the oldest and largest of its kind. It's hard to measure the impact of this contest for teams from four surrounding counties – twenty-three schools all total.

It meant three possible games just this week. If Clatonia won Tuesday, they'd play on Thursday; and a win on Thursday meant another game Friday. How they hoped to shine!

Preparation was underway for the MUDECAS week. Students and staff would journey to Beatrice for the competitions hosted in the Beatrice City Auditorium.

As part of the Public Works Administration (PWA) program began by President Franklin Roosevelt, the impressive building was built in 1939. The program put America to work in the depression.

The building is an example of the art deco architectural style, with its emphasis on simple geometrical lines, a flat roof, and smooth walls. The two-story brick structure consists of a multi-use arena for athletics, theater, and conventions. Concerts and social events became part of its purpose, with the two one-story wings on either side of the main block to be used for the students and players during the activities.

The Clatonia Cardinals had already won eight MUDECAS basketball tournaments and were hoping to win their ninth.

## **MUDECAS – Music, Speech, and Drama, Too** *Beatrice, Nebraska – January 13 - 18, 1958*



*Norbert Schuerman – Music Teacher at Clatonia and Bennet*

MUDECAS week was where kids met kids. Beyond Clatonia's school walls, beyond the comforts of home, horizons broadened. Ideas were born. Children began to function as adults. Self-reliance. Mutual and collective respect. Positive experiences.

Norbert Schuerman taught music part-time at Clatonia, and half-time at Bennet, splitting duties and joining together students. He put aside the natural tendency to be a rival, having been himself a student from DeWitt. But music was less a rivalry than sports; and therefore, his music students became quickly friends, and shared a room at the Beatrice City Auditorium.

Girls will be girls, and boys will be boys, and there was a lot of girl and boy-watching going on. It seemed that many of the boys were ogling one particular junior coed from Bennet.

Carol King had shining, wavy brunette hair and a talent to lead their team as cheerleader. And the real charm was her voice. She sang in the Bennet High School Choir, a sweet and captivating soprano.

## **MUDECAS Rematch and Revenge** *Beatrice, Nebraska – January 14<sup>th</sup> & 16<sup>th</sup>, 1958*

The Sterling Maroons were the first tournament opponent and the first team that year to take the lead in the first quarter. It had been an easy win for the Cardinals when they met Sterling in the third game that season.

In the MUDECAS, two of the Sterling starters were missing. It fell on their star player, Larry Rathe, to carry the load and it wasn't working. He scored only six points and fouled out in the third quarter.

Coach Ihrig should have been taking it easy and relaxing in the gift of an easy game, but he had stoved himself up into a fury because of the Cardinals lackluster performance.

So he pulled all the first team and put in the second team. They still maintained the lead by the end of the first quarter: 10 to 6.

Forgiveness for the starters and a return to the game gave the Cardinals a 30 to 12 lead at the half.

To avoid the criticism from the competition for running up the score, Coach pulled Rodney Sagehorn after three quarters and 29 points.

Game 9: Clatonia 77 – Sterling 29

(Rodney Sagehorn 29, Oren Miller 21, Ronnie Miller 15, Bob Sykes 10)

Pure revenge came in the second game of the tournament against the Hickman Bulldogs. Hickman had sent Clatonia home with a loss in district play the year before. But the Cardinals were conditioned, and though the Bulldogs pulled close in the third quarter, the Runnin' Redbirds ran away with a win.

Game 10: Clatonia 61 – Hickman 43

(Rodney Sagehorn 25, Oren Miller 10, Ronnie Miller 17)

## **The Basketball Finals at MUDECAS** *Beatrice, Nebraska – January 17, 1958*

Everyone expected the Cardinals from Clatonia and the Panthers from Sprague-Martell to be in the finals.

It was hard enough to beat the Panthers in the regular season, but to meet them again and win seem insurmountable.

Two of the three games ended in victories for Coach Ihrig over Sprague-Martell and the fiery coach, F.S. Mann. The one loss was in the first meeting in the regional finals when Bob had coached at Otoe. A Panther win by two had sent Otoe home.

Just play the game. Don't look back. Don't look ahead. It's the first rule of coaching. Clatonia trailed the Panthers in the first quarter until an offensive spurt from Ronnie Miller gave the Cardinals a slim 16 to 15 edge.

In the second quarter, the Cardinals launched eight uninterrupted points.

Ronnie Miller sparked the team in both halves, but Rodney Sagehorn was having a rough go. The Panthers double-teamed him in the first half and he didn't score once. But in the second half he added ten points. While the Panthers worked on shutting Rodney down, the other Cardinals scored some more.

Game 11: Clatonia 61 – Sprague-Martell 47  
(Rodney Sagehorn 10, Oren Miller 14, Ronnie Miller 20)



*A Happy Clatonia Cardinals Basketball Team holding up the MUDECAS Basketball Trophy along with Ronnie Miller*

## **Snow Storm**

### *Clatonia, Nebraska – January 21, 1958*

“Every team can be their own worst enemy.”

“It's foolish to think you're going to win.”

“Every game still comes down to execution.”

“The team that thinks they can and the team that fears they can't are both right.”

“Nobody who ever gave his best has ever regretted it.”

As the boys ran to warm up and ran to cool down, Coach Ihrig chanted the mottos in rhythm. His voice was like a song to make the boys remember to do everything the right way.

But he was not a coach to win at any cost. He believed in fair play, integrity, and hard work.

After the tournament, Coach pushed harder than ever. Yet no amount of pushing and practice would take away the fear of losing. Losing a game. Losing a player to injury. Losing the support of the fans.

The path to losing kept Bob awake at night. What were Filley High School's strengths? What were their weaknesses? Clatonia would meet them Tuesday night, January 21<sup>st</sup>.

But a snowstorm barraged Southeast Nebraska, with road closures except for the main highways. A concerned principal called to reschedule the game, and the comforted coach, Bob, breathed a sigh of relief.

The heavy snow was to Bob a blanket of calm.

## **Liberty Mustangs** *Liberty, Nebraska – January 24, 1958*

With an evening free, Bob caught up on mail and reading the newspapers. There were cards from fans and letters from various school administrators ever since the *Lincoln Journal* had printed the article about his coaching career.

Yet unless there was an extenuating circumstance, Bob avoided talking to school administrators during the season.

Bob mailed a copy of the *Journal* write-up to his mother, but she never acknowledged it.

By Friday, it was winter-safe to travel to Liberty to play the Mustangs. It was the second road game of the year and a twenty-five car caravan started south.

In the bottom of Gage County, Liberty was as small as Clatonia, and the gym was so small, it wouldn't hold everyone. The center circle touched the arches of the free throw lines, and the balcony overhang made shooting from a corner nearly impossible.

It all made the boys testy and resulted in a poorly performed first half.

Finally, in the third quarter, the Cardinals got it together and exploded with thirty points. Coach gave the starters a rest while the second team closed out the contest.

Game 12: Clatonia 84 – Liberty 45

(Rodney Sagehorn 32, Oren Miller 22, Ronnie Miller 18)

## **Horror in Lincoln** *Lincoln, Nebraska – January 27, 1958*

In the minds of the Coach and his Cardinals, practices were focused on the next opponent, the next game, the next week.

But out of nowhere came news of a horrific happening and not very far from home.

In Lincoln, Marion and Velda Bartlett, and Velda's two-year old daughter had been brutally murdered. Marion and Velda were shot and the little girl was struck in the face with the butt of a rifle, then strangled. The bodies were found partially frozen in an outbuilding and outhouse in the Bartlett back yard.

Velda's oldest daughter had come looking for her fourteen-year-old sister, Caril Ann Fugate. Caril's sister entered the property with the older brother of Charlie Starkweather.

Charlie and Caril Ann had been hanging out together for nearly a year and nobody was happy about it. Eventually, Caril Ann's stepfather, Marion Bartlett, had told Charles to leave and never come back. On the way out the door, Marion kicked Charles in the butt and Starkweather was mad, mad, mad.

The police came on the scene and began the manhunt for Charlie and Caril Ann. Everyone wondered whether Caril Ann was a hostage or willing accomplice.

The police investigation concluded that the bodies had been one week dead. Further investigation came to light that Caril Ann had been sending away visiting relatives for nearly a week at the house with the excuse that the whole family was sick.

Not sick. Dead. And with Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate gone to who knew where, eastern Nebraska citizens were on edge.

Coach Ihrig took in the gravity of the situation, yet went on and through the regular practices. He saw no reason to stop the work that clearly must be done.

But pressure from the community sounded. Out came the hand guns and rifles and shotguns. Practice was suspended.

Clatonia locked up.

## **Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate** *Lincoln, Nebraska – January 27, 1958*



*Caril Ann Fugate and Charles Starkweather*

Out near Bennet, 70 year old August Meyer welcomed Charles and Caril Ann onto his farm where the Starkweathers had hunted in past seasons. Mr. Meyer had been a family friend for years.

But when the old man sloughed off to one of the yard buildings, Charles shot him in the back of the head, then turned on the dog and shot him too, just for barking.

Into the house the couple went and found food and cash and a handgun with a supply of ammunition. They took off in the poor man's vehicle, careening over the slick road, getting stuck once, and then again, until a pair of Bennet high school students stopped to help and died in the process.

Robert Jensen and Carol King lost their lives violently that day in a nearby storm cellar. They were both shot, but not before the young lady had been raped and stabbed repeatedly in her genital area.

Starkweather stole Jensen's car and arrived back in Lincoln where Caril Ann ordered burgers at a local diner, was recognized by the waitress, and the couple got away yet once more.

## **Charles Starkweather** *Lincoln, Nebraska – January 28, 1958*



*Charlie Starkweather*

The police quickly built a profile of the Starkweather young man, gathering information from Charlie's family who cooperated fully in the investigation.

As a youngster, Charles was bullied. He was different, and those differences resulted in his being picked on. His manner of speaking was odd. He was bowlegged and short, and had bright red hair.

By the time Charlie had entered junior high, his volatility had escalated to the point that he was constantly fighting those schoolmates who even looked at him the wrong way. He frightened other students and eventually dropped out of high school.

He took a job as a trash collector which paid poorly and somehow matched the way his life was going. To make the work more miserable he shouted obscenities at the customers who lived in the neighborhoods where the truck passed through.

Charlie's idol was James Dean and he copied his slicked-back hair style and his way of smoking. Every rebel needed a girlfriend and Charlie's older brother had introduced him to Caril Ann. She was the only bright spot in his world.

Everything else was pure evil, violence, and anger.

## **Panic in the Heartland** *Lincoln, Nebraska – January 28, 1958*

Horrendously, the killings hadn't ended with those violent acts against young Carol King.

Early on January 28th, Charles and Caril Ann drove to Lincoln's Country Club area where he had previously hauled trash. He knew where he was going and when he knocked at the door of one home, the maid let them in. After all, he had done snow removal for the family too, so it was easy for Charles to gain entry.

The maid led the couple inside to see the mistress of the house, wife of C. Lauer Ward, a steel company executive. Charles tied the women up and later stabbed them to death, then waited for Mr. Ward who had been dining with the Nebraska governor.

Mr. Ward arrived home to the horror that Starkweather had laid on the family. Then Charlie shot the man too, then took some jewelry and the Ward's 1956 Packard and fled the scene.

As these killings were being reported in the local newspapers and on television it caused enormous panic in Lincoln and the surrounding area. One thing is for sure, nothing like it had ever happened before. Walter Cronkite flew into Lincoln and broadcasted his nightly newscast right on the Bennett farm where Charles Starkweather killed that farmer and those two poor high school kids.

Clatonia was only a few miles from where the killing took place. Students at Clatonia knew 16-year-old Carol King and 17-year-old Bobby Jensen. The little town of Clatonia and the entire state were in total shock about the events of the day. The Clatonia music teacher, Mr. Norbert Schuerman, also taught at Bennett and the two murdered kids were his students.

As school superintendent, Bob was concerned for the safety of all the students, but in particular, he paid attention to his players. They too were struggling mightily with what was going on just miles away. The community wanted the basketball team to win, and it was his job to see they did just that. But the town was being torn apart because some folks thought the next few games should be cancelled, or in the very least – postponed.

Others were vehement and against any cancellation or postponement. After all, the team had been working hard all year long, why let some lunatic ruin their goals and aspiration?

The boys and Coach Ihrig were caught in the middle.

All of Nebraska was scared stiff. But first and foremost, people diligently protected their families. Johnny Sagehorn and Rodney Sagehorn slept with loaded guns next to their beds. They parked the family pickup at the far end of their driveway, with the keys in the ignition. They prayed Starkweather would take the vehicle and leave the family alone.

Discord in the community and the fear of a murderer nearby had flustered the players. Clatonia was undefeated, and Bob was having a heck of a time keeping the boys focused. The

national news about Starkweather was their local news. It was unimaginable what was happening next door.

## **Charles Starkweather captured** *Douglas, Wyoming – January 29, 1958*



*Charles Starkweather captured in Wyoming and Caril Ann Fugate taken into custody*

The governor of Nebraska ordered the National Guard to help in the manhunt for Starkweather, and offered a thousand dollar reward to anyone helping in the killer's capture.

But slippery Starkweather snuck out of Lincoln and pointed the Ward's Packard due west. There was a car parked alongside the road within the confines of sparsely populated Wyoming where Charles stopped to switch cars. Merle Collison, a traveling shoe salesman, sat alone in his Buick, sleeping from the exhaustion of time on the road. When a bullet came

through the window, Collison scrambled out of the car, but was mowed down with nine bullets coming in rapid fire. Another senseless act from a villain who had no regard for human life.

A Buick and a Packard parked on the side of the road meant possible trouble, so a good man stopped to see if he could help. When the man saw that Collison was dead, he and Starkweather started to scuffle. A passing patrol officer noticed the commotion and stopped to render aid.

Caril Ann Fugate ran to the officer, pleading her innocence, while Charles used the distraction to pull away in the Packard.

Speeding toward Douglas, the next town to the west, Starkweather watched in the mirrors as the patrolman gained the distance. When a bullet shattered the back window, a piece of glass nicked Charles' ear and he panicked seeing his own blood. Thinking it was a mortal wound, he stopped the Packard, exited, and knelt on the ground with his hands behind his head in surrender.

The arrest was made and interrogations began. Starkweather confessed to eleven murders beginning with the first one that had stumped the Lincoln police.

Charles killed Robert Colvert on November 30, 1957. Colvert had worked as a night gas station attendant on Cornhusker Highway. Charles had asked to buy a teddy bear on credit and was denied. So he had come back with a gun, took the money in the cash register, kidnapped the man, and shot him in the head on the edge of town.

With Starkweather in custody, Nebraskans should feel safe, but there would be an unease until Starkweather was dead. And even after he was buried, the scar and stain marked the State.

## **Resumption of Practice** *Clatonia, Nebraska – January 30, 1958*

Somehow, there was a consensus and everyone finally agreed that it was “time.”

A time to work.

A time to play.

A time to rest.

A time to practice.

The Starkweather danger had passed; or at least to some degree. Venture back to normal and that meant focus on the basics.

Finger pushups. Head to toe squats. Rest. Sleep, and a nine o'clock curfew.

To get back in form after the short time off, Coach decided on a scrimmage. The second team would challenge the starting five. The losers would run fifty laps. Incentive enough.

When the second team won, the boys were elated, but Coach extended the time, and the starting five won over.

It wasn't fair! The second team starting guard, Tom Heller, was so mad he refused to run the laps. He was ready to quit the whole thing.

But Rodney consoled Tom and told him to just run the laps in spite of the injustice.

It wasn't right – extending the time. The boys knew it. Bob knew it.

In the short period of time the team stopped practicing and playing games from the Starkweather ordeal, Coach Ihrig decided to switch to a man to man defense. They had been running a zone defense; however, it was time to step up and Coach knew they boys needed to be in better shape, yet it would improve the team in the long run.

Man to man turned out to be a good decision and AlDean Blome turned out to be the best man to man defensive player. He would always be sent to guard the opposing team's best player.

Strategically, Coach Ihrig looked for new ways to maximize practice. So in the dead of winter, the team practiced with gloves and galoshes on, the weight and burden making the game of basketball nearly impossible.

Grumbling about it was of no use, because Coach's motto was: "The harder you work, the harder it is to lose."

## **Barneston Indians**

*Clatonia, Nebraska – Friday, January 31, 1958*

What a relief it was to finally play a game after the hype and hysteria of the Starkweather killings.

Barneston loved their Indians' football team. They were one of only a handful of Class D schools that played eleven man football.

During 1957, they went undefeated in football, but their toughness and talent did not transfer over to basketball.

The outcome was expectably predictable. Rodney Sagehorn hit 15 field goals for his 30 points. Ronnie Miller went to the free throw line 15 times to account for ten of his points. Fifty cents went into the kitty representing misses.

Game 13: Clatonia 84 – Barneston 45  
(Rodney Sagehorn 30, Oren Miller 12, Ronnie Miller 24)

## **Filley Wildcats**

*Clatonia, Nebraska – Saturday, February 1, 1958*

It's never easy to make time for a canceled game. To schedule it required placing the game into a week that was already full, and no one wanted to play back-to-back games.

From the small village of Filley, home to 150 souls, in Gage County, came the Wildcat contingency. The Filley girls volleyball started the night off with a win; and then, the Clatonia junior varsity took over and won their game with Bobby Sykes as leading scorer.

By the time the first period of play for the varsity was over, the Runnin' Redbirds were way out front at 28 to 9. Then at halftime it was 50 to 16 with Ronnie Miller and Rodney Sagehorn piling on the points.

Midway through the third, Coach Ihrig cleared the bench while the home crowd protested, but he knew he was right in putting in the second team and he knew he was right when he told them to stop shooting near the end of the game.

Coach was adamant: "If anyone shoots and scores, he's off the team!"

The Cardinals were dangerously close to scoring 100 points. If that should happen, Bob knew it would damage public perception of the team; and more importantly, it would damage the psyche of the players.

Especially noteworthy was young Bobby Sykes. He performed well in two games that evening – in the junior varsity game and again in the varsity match.

Game 14: Clatonia 96 – Filley Wildcats 34

(Rodney Sagehorn 27, Oren Miller 14, Ronnie Miller 28, Bob Sykes 12)

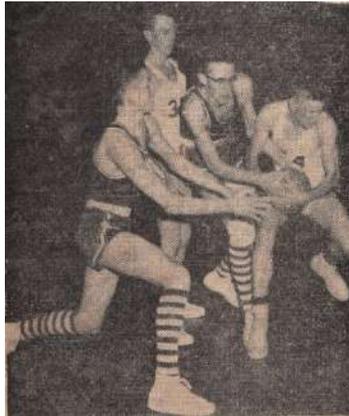
## **Gage County Tournament** *Beatrice, Nebraska – Monday - Friday, February 3- 7, 1958*

The beginning of February saw another basketball opportunity. It was the eighth annual Gage County Basketball Tournament at the Beatrice City Auditorium, and Clatonia would play the Filley Wildcats again.

In defeating the Wildcats in tournament play 71 to 30, Clatonia earned their 15<sup>th</sup> straight win.

Then in the semi-final game, the Cardinals faced the Barneston Indians again, and won handily for their 16<sup>th</sup> victory, 64 to 28.

## **Gage County Finals** *Beatrice, Nebraska – Friday, February 7, 1958*



*Championship Struggle Clatonia vs. Holmesville  
Ronnie Miller & Bill Schernikau vs. Harv Ideus & Lavele Frantz*

The Cardinals had made their way to the finals, but the opponent was tough and worthy of worry. The Holmesville Tigers had a new head coach, Dewey Van Cleave, and his emphasis was man to man defense, a fast break offense, and the much-talked-about full court press.

Besides the opponent, Coach worried about the boys and their emotions. They seemed drained and it was making a mark on their physical abilities. Had the Starkweather scare taken more of a toll than Coach could have imagined?

Back and forth went the lead while nerves tightened in players, coaches, and fans.

The Cardinals led by one after one and it was all tied at 30 at halftime. The Tigers led after three, and it looked like it might end in a Holmesville win.

Yet Oren Miller tied the score with only a little more than two minutes left in the game. Then Ronnie Miller took a shot, went two points ahead; and thirty seconds later, he did it again.

The Tigers weren't done and at eleven seconds Harv Ideus made two free throws to pull within two. Rodney Sagehorn cinched it for the Cardinals and it was just enough points in just enough time.

Clatonia had barely squeaked by. Maybe it was due to the absence of AlDean Blome, who was missing due to being down with pneumonia.

Regardless of the reasons, it was the closest game of the year so far; and this called for more work, more preparation, and an understanding that they would meet the dangerous Holmesville Tigers at their home court in eleven days.

Game 17: Clatonia 57 – Holmesville Tigers 53

(Rodney Sagehorn 29, Oren Miller 11, Ronnie Miller 13)

## **Tougher Practices**

### ***Clatonia, Nebraska – Early February 1958***

Quietly, Bob steamed about the narrow win the entire way home. He knew one thing for sure and that was his team was simply not focused.

So at 11:30 p.m., dressed in street clothes, the boys did what they were told to do. One hundred twenty-five laps. Enough time to run and to either run far away from the requirements of an angry coach, or to run until fatigue of body and mind dug up enough will power to improve and go on.

And somehow, it was in their collective wills to go on and go up and do even more than required. One hundred fifty laps. It was their peace offering and more.

Coach arranged countless scrimmages in the days ahead; some against the second team with eight players playing against the first five and some against the alumni. Coach dug for ways and means to challenge and sharpen, to strengthen and repeat every good play.

And so it went.

## **Gage County All-Star Team**

### ***Beatrice, Nebraska – February 10, 1958***

Al Riddington, the sports editor for the *Beatrice Daily Sun*, listed their annual Gage County All-Star Team. Players were chosen on the basis of agility, teamwork, rebounding, ball handling, sharp-shooting, and speed.

The 1958 All-Star Team included:

Ron Sutter – Barneston  
Eugene Wallman – Cortland  
Oren Miller – Clatonia  
Rodney Sagehorn – Clatonia  
Eldon Whitehead – Holmesville  
Harvey Ideus – Holmesville

From the standpoint of scoring alone, Rodney Sagehorn was chosen for the team. But it wasn't just about making baskets. There was speed and agility, dribbling, and handling the ball for team advantage. That all went to Oren Miller who possessed those qualities and more, making him the team leader on the court. So many times, he would pass the ball to Rodney or Ronnie rather than trying a shot himself. His unselfish playing practice no doubt got him the spot on the All-Star Team.

Clatonia fans thought Ronnie Miller should be on the Team also, but obviously too many boys from one school didn't sit well with the paper or the reading public.

Best not to make too much of the recognition. From Coach Bob came simple congratulations, then on to practice and the hard work at hand.

## **Virginia Pirates**

### ***Virginia, Nebraska – February 14, 1958***

The Clatonia girls' volleyball gained a win over the lady Pirates. Then they sat down to watch the junior varsity win their game as well.

Out of town, scrunched into a small gymnasium, worn out, and in no mood to be someone's valentine, the Cardinals varsity squad moved into position at center court.

In spite of the cramped quarters, the team went home with a win amid complaints from some Virginian fans who took offense at the raucous cowbells brought in by a few over-zealous Cardinal fans.

Game 18: Clatonia 87 – Virginia Pirates 37

(Rodney Sagehorn 31, Oren Miller 12, Ronnie Miller 14, Bob Sykes 12)

## **Rematch with Holmesville** *Holmesville, Nebraska – February 18, 1958*

To Holmesville went the faithful Clatonia faction. Supporting their young athletes was part of what small towns did to give their children the best possible advantage, and to make a clear mark for their community. Intense competition was the norm and it seemed at times that the referees showed partiality. But it never served the team you were coaching to make disparaging comments to the officials. This Coach Bob knew full well from past experience, yet the temptation to call certain refs out was nearly irresistible.

The first time Clatonia and Holmesville had played, Rodney Sagehorn has scored 29 points. Coach Dewey Van Cleave was not going to let that happen again, so the Tigers double-teamed Rodney and Oren Miller, leaving Ronnie Miller to carry the load and he made 13 of 13 shots to the good, making the score Cardinals 42 and Tigers 29 at the half.

Then Coach Van Cleave turned his attention on Ronnie Miller rendering him nearly powerless to score.

But Coach Ihrig made adjustments, too. In the second half, he coached the boys to stall. The tactic went against what he felt to be the principled way to play, but he determined to do what would bring about a win and stalling just might work.

Holmesville held Rodney Sagehorn to a season low of 9 points which was partially brought on by a certain bad habit of his. He would chuck the ball away from the official when a foul was called against him. It showed poor sportsmanship and would surely come back to hurt him and his team. Rodney was already in foul trouble and it was turning out to be the worst game of the season for the 6'2" forward.

Coach Ihrig kept his feelings to himself regarding the officiating. How could Clatonia have only 11 free throws while Holmesville had 23?

In the end, the Cardinals won over the Tigers and Coach Ihrig had the opportunity to praise the opponents in a post-game interview with the *Beatrice Daily Sun*. “Give the Tigers credit. Holmesville is a darn good team with an excellent young coach.”

Game 19: Clatonia 56 – Holmesville Tigers 49

(Rodney Sagehorn 9, Oren Miller 5, Ronnie Miller 27, Bob Sykes 10)

## **Cortland Raiders**

### ***Cortland, Nebraska – February 21, 1958***

The gym at Cortland had no seating. Their away games turned out to be the best case scenarios for the Raiders because then they could play to an audience. In the case of there being a home game, they met at the city auditorium in Hallam.

But the place didn't seem to matter for Cortland. They lost the game while Clatonia won in the final game of the season making it the twentieth win in an undefeated season. It was the first undefeated season in school history.

The exhilarated Clatonia coach went to the locker room with wholehearted commendations. The pride he felt couldn't be measured. Again, when he was given a chance to comment to the *Beatrice Daily Sun*, he told the writer: “The boys deserve the honor due them, but I must share my good fortune with ex-coach Gene Else.”

Game 20: Clatonia 67 – Cortland Raiders 35

(Rodney Sagehorn 24, Oren Miller 19, Ronnie Miller 12)

## **Class D District Tournament**

### ***Beatrice, Nebraska – February 26 and 27, 1958***

For Clatonia came another chance to play and advance. The opponent would be the Plymouth Pilgrims. The setting for district play would be the Beatrice high school gymnasium, and tonight, it was time for history.

Rodney Sagehorn scored 37 points with 18 coming in the first quarter. He added another 8 points in the second period; and then sat down with his fellow starters for the third period.

Then with Rodney back in the game in the fourth, he added another 11 points and took a long shot to bring them to 99.

It had gone too far by then, and Coach Ihrig warned the boys that whoever pushed them to 100 would be off the team. Luckily, they ended without the loss of a player and Coach's favor.

#### Game 21: Clatonia 99 – Plymouth Pilgrims 33

(Rodney Sagehorn 37, Oren Miller 14, Ronnie Miller 18, Bob Sykes 12, AlDean Blome 10)

The next night, they came up against the Odell Tigers who had advanced to the semi-finals.

By halftime the Cardinals led with a score of 44 to 13, and the second team took over for most of the rest of the game.

AlDean Blome was back from his bout with pneumonia and his contribution was going to be needed going forward.

#### Game 22: Clatonia 76 – Odell Tigers 47

(Rodney Sagehorn 21, Oren Miller 15, Ronnie Miller 13)

## **District Finals** *Beatrice, Nebraska – February 28, 1958*

Nearly a year ago, the final game at the district tournament had ended the season for the Cardinals.

As it played out, Clatonia would meet the Tigers of Holmesville in the district finals. It's hard to beat a team twice in a year, but to win three times is nearly impossible. And a certain amount of hype was being given to the Holmesville team from Al Riddington of the *Beatrice Daily Sun*. He had nicknamed Coach Dewey Van Cleave's team the "Go-Go Tigers" because of their fast break offense.

The winner of tonight's contest would go on to the regional playoffs and gain the chance at the state tournament.

From the outset, the "Go-Go Tigers" were stalling. Van Cleave intended to disrupt the Cardinals offense, but the plan backfired.

The Cardinals led at the end of the first quarter, 17 to 2.

Ronnie Miller was having a stellar night and had contributed 13 points by half. Cardinals 33, Tigers 8.

Holmesville managed to slow down Clatonia's offense, but the Cardinals took another win – 50 to 35.

Coach Ihrig's team had won the District Tournament and would be advancing to the regionals.

Game 23: Clatonia 50 – Holmesville Tigers 35  
(Rodney Sagehorn 15, Oren Miller 4, Ronnie Miller 16)

## **Regional Playoffs** *Crete, Nebraska – March 5, 1958*

Sixteen sites hosted the Class D District Tournaments. Those sixteen winners went to four regional playoff sites with four teams competing at each place in a two-game format. The winners of regionals went to State.

The Class D regionals were to be played in Crete at the local high school. The four teams assigned to this site included: Stella, Beaver Crossing, Sprague Martell (Central), and Clatonia.

Clatonia was one of only three schools that had remained undefeated for the year. The Class D Red Willow Zephyrs and the Class C Alma Cardinals had won all their games along with Clatonia.

Clatonia's first round competitor would be the Tigers of Stella from Richardson County.

In the first quarter, Stella took a five point lead, but the boys didn't panic.

In the second period, Ronnie Miller was fouled, took the free throw, made it, and tied the game. By the half, the Runnin' Redbirds took the lead at 22 to 14. It was far below Clatonia's average.

Coach Ihrig was concerned. It was Stella's defense that was holding them back. The speech in the locker room centered on patience, focusing on only those shots that were likely to go in; and furthermore, if Stella chose to stall, it would be okay.

In the end, it was a win, in spite of the low numbers. And more importantly, it would advance them to the regional finals.

Game 24: Clatonia 48 – Stella 36

(Rodney Sagehorn 20, Oren Miller 10, Ronnie Miller 9)

## **Regional Finals** *Crete, Nebraska – March 6, 1958*

Unlikely as it seemed, the Beavers of Beaver Crossing won over Sprague-Martell Central on March 5, and the stage was set for the next contest.

The Cardinal game plan was no secret. It was the way Coach Ihrig coached. Start quick. Run, run, run. Wear out the other guy. Put points on the board and get way ahead.

It seemed like every team that Clatonia went up against stalled. The Beavers held the ball and by halftime the Cardinals were only up by five, 25 to 20.

By the third quarter, Clatonia went ahead by 40 to 25. It had been the man-to-man defense that had been working. That strategy plus – run, run, run.

Late in the fourth, the starters came out, and by then it was 55 to 27.

The win qualified Clatonia for a spot at State and the Cardinals celebrated their 25<sup>th</sup> victory.

Game 25: Clatonia 59 – Beaver Crossing 35

(Rodney Sagehorn 23, Oren Miller 9, Ronnie Miller 19)

## **State Bound**

*Clatonia, Nebraska – March 7 - 13, 1958*



*Front Row: Bill Schernikau, AlDean Blome, Harley Bergmeyer, Jim Heller, Tom Heller, Richard Suiter Student Manager  
Back Row: Bob Gerdes, Oren Miller, Ronnie Miller, Rodney Sagehorn, Bob Sykes, Coach Bob Ihrig*

Clatonia was on top of the world. Gage County residents were jubilant. It was a rare moment in history and Al Riddington from the *Beatrice Daily Sun* came to town for pictures and a story.

Clatonians made motel reservations in Lincoln and bought gas early knowing the filling station owner was heading for Lincoln with the rest of the town.

Only the local sheriff was staying behind. Duty kept him planted in Clatonia. He would take no chances and would keep watch while the whole village made plans to travel north.

## **Scouting Red Willow**

*Venango, Nebraska – March 7, 1958*

Bob studied the newspapers for statistics and hints of strategies for upcoming opponents. The regional playoff games held the foresight he needed to plan for the next round.

Clatonia might potentially be competing against his old neighbor school, the Red Willow Zephyrs. There was a strong probability they would meet in the finals of the state tournament in Lincoln, if Red Willow could win their final regional playoff game and if each team was victorious in their opening round game at state.

The final game of regionals for the Zephyrs was to be held way out west in Venango near the Colorado border. It had been Bob's first coaching assignment.

Even though the Clatonia Cardinals had been ranked number one in Class D since the beginning of the season, in their most recent poll the *Omaha World Herald* had elevated the Red Willow Zephyrs to number one and demoted Clatonia to number two. Coach Ihrig felt that second place was a great place to be and the lower position would serve Clatonia well.

There was just enough time for Bob to attend the final regional playoff game at Venango, scout the Zephyrs, and Johnny Sagehorn would ride along. Never before had Johnny missed a day of milking cows, but if ever there was a good reason to do so, this scouting trip was it.

Bob watched the players and studied the Coach, trying to discern the game plan on defense and offense. Johnny watched along, giving his homespun commentary throughout the four quarters.

Red Willow was triumphant over Brady, 63 to 54, and Bob began to plot a plan should the Cardinals and Zephyrs meet in the near future.

Clatonia had the advantage of height over Red Willow and the Cardinals were gaining proficiency with their man-to-man defense.

From Venango, the scouting duo drove northeast to Norfolk, where they witnessed the Cardinals of Herman defeat Wayne Prep in overtime, 34 to 32.

The night drive home to Clatonia gave Bob time to think about potential battles with Herman and Red Willow.

Life was unpredictable and basketball matched the steep path.

## **Final Week of Practice** *Clatonia, Nebraska – March 10 - 14, 1958*

As a coach, Bob was vindictive concerning the mistakes his team made. Every little blunder was a big blow-up. He was a stickler for detail, even when they won the game. His intensity in coaching was passionate and he left nothing undone to win a game.

Coaching involves showing a team how to win, but also how not to lose. A coach must teach players how to keep out of foul trouble, yet play aggressively. Practices were a classroom. The coach demanded the full attention of the boys.

Bob did not want to try and embarrass any opponent intentionally, but he had to let his team play. He wanted to let the second team play as much as possible to gain experience for future years. Nor would he allow fans to dictate his decisions, and that upset some boosters.

Yes, he pushed – ruthlessly. But his charisma and charm and winning smile won the boys over. They wanted to do for him what he wanted, and that was to win a championship for the team, the school, and for everyone’s own self-fulfillment. He pushed himself to a state of exhaustion. That meant when he returned home at night, he didn’t have much time for family.

Yes, he had an explosive temper, but his temper did not define his character. Instead, it was just a flaw in his personality that he tried to control. His language was not something everyone agreed with, but by this point in the season, the “Goddamnits,” “Christ sakes,” and “Sonsofbitches” were taken with a grain of salt by most everyone – because they were winning.

Bob was not cocky, although some people would describe him as such. He had a quiet confidence and inner poise resulting from the work he tried to establish in the boys. He had no fear but was excited for the opportunity to be the best and was eager to play against the best. To be the best you must beat the best. A true athlete loves competing.

One must have a keen respect for opponents. Every boy knows how hard they have worked. On any given day, any athlete can beat another athlete. Games are not scripted. Games are as real as real can be. That’s the reality of competition.

This last week of practice was grueling and physical. Bob was trying to mentally prepare his team for the most intense games the boys would play all year.

## **Herman Cardinals**

*Lincoln, Nebraska – March 14, 1958*



*Clatonia's crowd at the opening game of the State Basketball Tournament*

Winning makes opponents jealous. Every game becomes a grudge match. Every team is out to get the winning team.

The first game at the State Basketball Tournament for the Clatonia Cardinals would come on Friday, March 14<sup>th</sup>, at noon against the Herman Cardinals. The game would be played inside the Coliseum on the campus of the University of Nebraska on the freshman court.

Herman is a village in Washington County, about 50 miles north of Omaha. The population of 360 residents was almost twice the size of Clatonia. Herman was adopted after Samuel Hermann conducted the first train to enter the small village.

Herman brought with them a record of 22 wins and a lone loss against Class C Uehling. Later in the season, Herman defeated Uehling in their second contest. Herman was led in scoring by two exceptional forwards, David Kroger and Larry West.

The game started off poorly for the Redbirds of Clatonia. The upper windows in the Coliseum did not have shades. The sunlight shone so brightly that it was hard for Bob's boys to see the basket.

There were seventeen missed shots in the first quarter alone by the Cardinals of Clatonia. Not surprisingly, the period ended in Herman's favor, 14 to 10.

As the noon sun passed overhead, Clatonia started to settle down. AlDean Blome hit a set shot toward the end of the second quarter and Clatonia went into the half with a slim lead.

## **Halftime**

### *Lincoln, Nebraska – March 14, 1958*

The team had played horribly in the first half. Coach Ihrig looked dazed. His face was red, he had chest pain, and an excruciating cramp ran down his arm. Sweat covered his face and neck.

A University staff member sat outside the makeshift locker room and when Bob saw him, he yelled at him. “Someone should do something about the sun shining on the court.”

The staff member didn’t know what to say. The coach’s anger worried the man, and he whispered: “Only God can do something about the sun, Sir.”

Bob’s unspoken goal had always been to get to state. Now that that had become a reality, he was suddenly fearful – fearful of losing. To get this far, and then lose would be his worst defeat ever. He would have preferred that they had never made it this far if they lost.

It seemed to Johnny Sagehorn that his friend Bob was off balance. “Let’s let Coach Else handle the boys in the locker room,” Johnny suggested. Bob tried to push Johnny aside, but his friend held him firmly. “The boys need their old coach right now. It’ll be okay. You go back to the bench and devise the best plan to win this game. It will be your greatest victory.”

There was little of a locker room. Bedsheets had been temporarily hung from the rafters in a corner.

Herb Riechers, a Clatonia banker, and Pete Steinmeyer, members of Clatonia’s 1922 State Championship Team, had been in the stands for every game that season. They came down from the bleachers and stood outside the curtains for security.

From behind the sheets, Coach Else calmed the team down. “We started this journey when you boys were still in grade school. You’ve been a great team all these years. You know the fundamentals. You are the very best this school has ever had. Now go out there and play the best game of your career. Show them why Clatonia is here. The entire town is behind you.”

Their old coach had inspired them, and Oren Miller jumped up and added his affirmation. They had the ability and determination to win and were just one half away from gaining what they had come so far to achieve.

## **Second Half of Game One** *Lincoln, Nebraska – March 14, 1958*

As it turned out, Bob worked out a game plan for the second half while he sat on the bench and took time to think things through calmly. Oren Miller would guard Herman’s best player – David Kroger. In the first half, Kroger scored most of their points; then again, he was hard to defend.

Surely, something was going on with Bob’s heart, but in the second half, with the break and a bit of regrouping, Bob came out with a better attitude, and just like a maestro, he orchestrated the rest of the game. Possession by possession, point by point, stop by stop, steal by steal, rebound by rebound, his team started showing why they belonged in the state tournament.

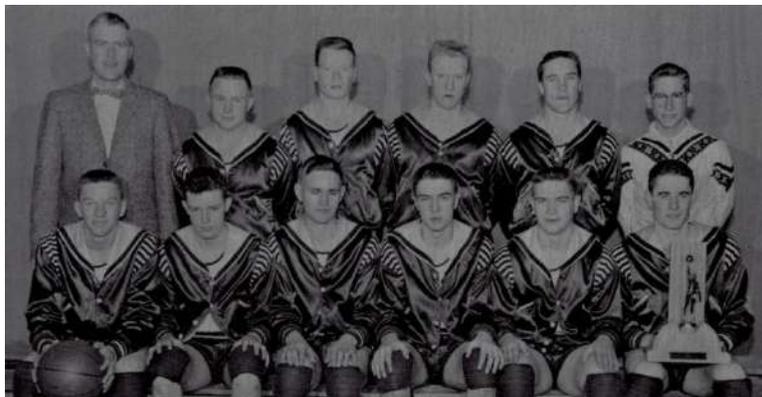
Rodney Sagehorn and Ronnie Miller played in foul trouble for the entire second half. Herman edged several times within a point or two in the last two periods, but they could never take the lead. David Kroger racked up 31 points for Herman and became the game’s leading scorer.

Oren Miller ignited the Runnin’ Redbirds to victory. His play-making, ball-handling, rebounding, and defensive skills carried them through. Oren was the most unselfish player Coach Ihrig had ever seen.

When the final buzzer sounded, Clatonia fans swarmed the court. It was a middle-of-the-day game, and Clatonia set an attendance record.

Game 26: Clatonia 54 – Herman 45  
(Rodney Sagehorn 21, Oren Miller 9, Ronnie Miller 16)

## Getting Ready for Red Willow *Lincoln, Nebraska – March 15, 1958*



*First Row: Don Reiners, Virgil Couse, Vernon Esch, Marvin Teel, Larry Reiners, Stuart Couse*  
*Second Row: Coach Don McKillip, Raymond Fisher, Allen Lindsey, Jim Mackey, Burdette Malleck, Ellis Hanthorn*

The Red Willow Zephyrs had been ranked #2 all year in nearly every newspaper across Nebraska before the *Omaha World Herald* elevated them to the top spot in their latest poll. They would bring an impressive and undefeated record of 28 and 0 to the state finals.

Red Willow and Herman had scored more than 100 points twice during the regular season. At Red Willow, the offensive playmaking ability was the highlight of the Zephyr team, and everyone on that team was a star. Their coach, Don McKillip, was the older brother of Leo McKillip. Bob had gone to school with Leo at McCook, where he had quarterbacked McCook to a 1946 State Championship in football. The Bison went undefeated that year after beating the number-one-ranked Islanders of Grand Island and the sensational Bobby Reynolds in the last game of the year.

From McCook, Leo had gone to Notre Dame to play football for the Fighting Irish. Head Coach Frank Leahy at Notre Dame had switched Leo from quarterback to defensive back. He

never had the collegiate career everyone was expecting. Nebraska wanted Leo to play quarterback for the Cornhuskers alongside running back Bobby Reynolds, but those plans never materialized.

Don McKillip was a sports star in his own right for the McCook Bison. Like his brother Leo, he also had attended St. Pat's. Then at McCook High, Don lettered in football, basketball, and track. He went on to play football for the McCook Junior College Indians, and then he attended the University of Colorado, where he again was a standout in football.

Don had come to Red Willow in 1954. The year before McKillip took over, the Zephyrs had gone to the State Basketball Tournament, winning their first two games before losing in the finals. This would be Red Willow's second trip to the state finals to play for a championship.

Bob knew Don had a great team, and Red Willow had the talent to beat Clatonia, especially if the Zephyrs could play their style of game. The team was strong and feisty and ran an up-tempo, fast breaking offense.

Championships are not won by wishing and hoping. They are won by hard work and dedication. To be the best, you have to beat the best. Bob ranked Red Willow as one of the best teams in the entire State of Nebraska.

He looked forward to the Championship game against the Zephyrs. Red Willow was near home, and somehow it felt good.

## **Pregame Speech**

### *Lincoln, Nebraska – March 15, 1958*

Red Willow had advanced to the state tournament finals by defeating Ulysses 79 to 73. Their game followed the contest between Clatonia and Herman. For a second time, Bob watched Red Willow play an exceptional offensive game, and watching Red Willow play helped him prepare for the finals.

The game would come down to defense and which team controlled the backboards. With what little time they had to practice before the championship game, Bob emphasized blocking out, staying between the opponent and the basket, proper footwork, stealing the ball, cutting off passing lanes, and moving the ball away from the opponent's basket as quickly as possible. He told the boys they needed to play on their toes. Teamwork was essential, and they had to work as a tightly-knit unit. Bob wanted to ensure everyone only took high-percentage shots and not force any bad or off-balanced shots. The team had been disciplined all year, and they needed to do it one more time.

After the boys were dressed and ready to warm up, Coach Ihrig gave his final speech.

“Wanting to win does not make a team win. Both teams want to win. If you took a vote, every player would vote to win if that's all it took. It will take hustle, desire, heart, willpower, and determination to be state champions. If you play with passion, you are more apt to be more precise. It's the team with the fewest mistakes that will win. To be the best, you have to beat the best, and Red Willow is ranked #1 for good reasons. They are a great team.

“I can only tell you that this has been an amazing season. I'll always remember what you have accomplished. Regardless of what happens in this game, win or lose, you will always remember the game you played today. Even though you have won 26 games in a row, this is the one game you'll remember forever. So why not go out and win it for yourselves, your family, and your school? Victory is up to you, and it's in your hands now. Let's pray.”

It was an emotional moment, and the boys knew a colossal battle awaited them. They had all the respect in the world for Red Willow. Very few teams can win 28 games in a row, but the Zephyrs had done it.

Harley Bergmeyer had been the cheerleader for the Cardinals all season. Always cheerful, always encouraging, and willing to do whatever it took to win. Around the room he paced, giving high fives to everyone, telling them they would win today.

Rodney Sagehorn just prayed, remembering how poorly they had started in the Herman game and hoping to make his first shot.

## **Clatonia Cardinals vs. Red Willow Zephyrs** *Lincoln, Nebraska – March 15, 1958*



*Clatonia's Rodney Sagehorn, #24 with an easy layup while Virgil Couse, #31 and Larry Reiners, #23 of Red Willow trailing*

Red Willow was ranked #1 and considered the home team. Number two Clatonia wore their road white jerseys with a chip on their shoulders.

The Zephyrs opened the game with a full court press, but the Cardinals, with the superb ball-handling skills of Oren Miller and Harley Bergmeyer, riddled Red Willow's defense for easy layups. Rodney hit his first shot. Then he and the Miller cousins, Oren and Ronnie, controlled the backboards, just as Coach Ihrig had hoped.

After an opening few minutes like that, the Runnin' Redbirds ran and took easy shots as they coasted to a first-quarter lead, 13 to 7. The naturally tall players of Clatonia bothered Red Willow throughout the game.

Coach Bob had told the boys to work the ball inside for close and high-percentage shots. In the second period, Red Willow closed the gap, 19 to 16, but when the Cardinals began running again, they gained rebounds on both ends of the court.

Just before the half ended, Oren Miller stole a Red Willow pass and dribbled the length of the court for an easy layup and the score favored Clatonia – 30 to 22.

Coach Ihrig was not happy with the score. He nagged and grilled the boys to play passionately and keep running. He hoped that Red Willow lacked stamina, so he planned to step up the tempo of the game.

## **State Finals Second Half** *Lincoln, Nebraska – March 15, 1958*



*Cheering on their team. Clatonia's Cheerleaders L to R: Janet Steinmeyer, Virginia Sagehorn, Lenora Schachenmeyer, Diane Ulrich*

Red Willow rallied briefly in the third quarter, closing the gap, 35 to 30. Then, their ace scorer, Burdette Malleck, fouled out midway through the period. In the game against Ulysses the day before, Malleck had scored 28 points. He fouled out with just six points. That's when the roof fell in for the Zephyrs.

In the final eight minutes, it was Clatonia all the way. They never stopped running.

Each player returned mentally to that first football practice, where Coach Ihrig made them run a mile out to the Zion Church and back in full uniform. Now, they fully understood why he had given such a daunting command.

Bob cleared the bench halfway through the fourth quarter so all ten players could see action in the finals. Bob Sykes was superb in the final quarter, scoring seven of his nine points. The final score told the story of the season – 63 to 47.

Red Willow made only 15% of their field goal attempts. They went 6 of 25 from the foul line. Coach Ihrig was correct: defense wins championships.

Game 27: Clatonia 63 – Red Willow 47  
(Rodney Sagehorn 22, Oren Miller 5, Ronnie Miller 16)

## **Champions** *Lincoln, Nebraska – March 15, 1958*



*1957 - 1958 Class D State Champions – Clatonia Cardinals – 27 & 0  
Bottom Row – AlDean Blome, Rodney Sagehorn, Harley Bergmeyer, Bob Gerdes, Bob Sykes  
Standing – Tom Heller, Jim Heller, Ronnie Miller, Coach Bob Ihrig, Oren Miller, Bill Schernikau*

The Clatonia Cardinals were the only team in the State of Nebraska during the 1957 – ’58 campaign to finish the season undefeated. They went 27 and 0, and in most of their games, they doubled the score of their opponents. All year, opponents had mocked them with the title “Candy Stripers,” but the mocking only motivated them to show their mockers up.

When the superintendent of the Nebraska Athletic Association put the winning trophy in Oren Miller’s hands, he congratulated the team for becoming the Class D State Champions. It would be a team that was never forgotten.

It has been the thrill of a lifetime for Bob to coach this group of boys, and he would never forget them.

It was time to celebrate, and Coach Ihrig took the team to Lee's Chicken near Pioneer Park in Lincoln. What more could there be?

## **Private Celebration** *Beatrice, Nebraska – March 15, 1958*



*Bob and Mays at the Beatrice Legion Club to celebrate a Championship*

Bob's younger sister, June, had taken the train from Holdrege to Lincoln to watch her brother coach in the championship game. She could not believe what she was seeing – her weak-hearted brother, running up and down the sidelines like there wasn't a thing wrong with him.

June's husband, Bud, worked for Debus Bread, and his boss would not grant him time off to attend the game. The radio in the bread truck was off limits, but Bud couldn't resist, so when he drove from Holdrege to Maywood, sounds of the game blared from the dashboard. Clatonia was handling Red Willow very effectively.

When he returned home to Holdrege, he knew that Bob's team was State Champions. He packed a suitcase quickly and drove to Clatonia, hoping to celebrate with Bob and everyone later that night.

Bob had hoped his mother would come and watch the team and see how he coached, but she had refused the offer of transportation and lodging. Regret welled up in him, while at the same time, he put it out of his mind to think about prolonging the celebratory mood.

Clatonians commonly thought everyone was in Lincoln at the game, but a few lone citizens stayed home. Maisy was one of them. She did not go to the tournament games and rarely went to any games during the regular season. It was a distraction for Bob when his children were in the stands, so it had become a habit for Maisy to stay home.

Lois Sagehorn stayed home, too. Johnny worried about big crowds in the big city and preferred that Lois be safe with the three little ones on the farm.

It was late when Bud arrived, and the team had returned to Clatonia. The Championship revelry continued as Bob, Maisy, Bud, and June drove to Beatrice where they met friends at the Legion Club.

It might take all night to celebrate this one.

## **Girls Volleyball** *Clatonia, Nebraska – March 1958*



*Front Row L to R: Sheryl Zietlow, Jerris Sagehorn, Leora Schachenmeyer, Virginia Sagehorn, Diane Ulrich  
Middle Row L to R: Sandra Schachenmeyer, Judeen Miller, Jane Schachenmeyer, Mary Ann Burger, Diane Blome, Janet Steinmeyer, Coach  
Ihrig  
Back Row: L to R: Laurel Elscher, LaVae Pohlman, Marjorie Speth, Julane Pohlman, Euncye Titkemeier*

With all the hoopla surrounding the varsity basketball team during the season, only a few fans had given much attention to girls' volleyball.

They had an exceptional season in their own right. Bob had coached the team for fifteen matches and three tournaments. The girls had played in the Gage County Volleyball, Daykin Invitational, and Mudecas Volleyball tournaments.

The girls won 75% of their matches, significantly improving over the previous year. With the main focus given to the boys, the girls had practiced during their physical education classes. As in places before Clatonia, the girls' teams had served as a panacea for Coach Ihrig, and an escape from the stressful days and night brought on by boys' sports.

**Rodney Sagehorn – All-State**  
*Lincoln, Nebraska – Late March 1958*



*Rodney Sagehorn – All-State Clatonia Forward*

Rodney Sagehorn, the standout scoring leader for the Clatonia Cardinals, had the best two-game scoring average among Class D teams at the state tourney. Only two other athletes in all the classes had a better per-game tournament average than the 6'2" Clatonia forward.

During the season, Sagehorn scored a total of 652 points for a 24.14 per-game average. Considering that he saw limited action in the fourth quarter during the season and only played part of the third period, he was still one of the top-scoring leaders in Nebraska.

That is why the *Omaha World Herald* selected Rodney Sagehorn as part of the Class D All-State team for 1958. The members of the Class D All-State team included:

Rodney Sagehorn – Clatonia Cardinals  
Burdette Malleck – Red Willow Zephyrs  
David Kroger – Herman Cardinals  
Larry Houtz – Madrid Pirates  
Alvin Semin – Ulysses Trojans

## **Family Photo**

*Lincoln, Nebraska – April 1958*



*Left to Right: Maisy (Dora Mae) Ihrig, Roger Royal, Pammy Sue, Bobby Mark, Kimmy Louise, Bob Ihrig*

Bob wasn't making much money at Clatonia, but he was living the life he wanted to live. Coaching was more important to him than anything else. He loved what he did. It consumed his every thought. If he thought of a new play in the middle of the night, he'd get up and write it down. He made a note if he thought of a new way to throw the ball in bounds. His mind never stopped working.

To Bob, there was no way to coach except with passion and pride. But there was plenty of bitter anger, pitiful regrets, hope of revenge, and exhaustion. Consequently, it took a toll on Bob's heart. Inexcusably, he lashed out at those he loved the most. The spouse and children seem to bear the brunt. He could show emotion during a pep talk with the team at a game, but he never showed the same to his children.

Coaching duties had eased a bit, and Maisy wanted to get a family photograph professionally done, as was so popular among their peers. Bob reluctantly agreed, so they all made a trip to Lincoln, where a photographer captured the only portrait of the Ihrig family.

## Championship Celebration *Clatonia, Nebraska – April 1958*

Flanked by red and white crepe paper and homemade banners everywhere, the Clatonia gymnasium looked delightfully festive.

The championship team enjoyed a steak banquet and were the guests of honor, surrounded by those who celebrated with them and paid the \$10 ticket price to get in.

As the attendees finished their steaks, adults pulled out their cigarettes and waited for the freshly brewed coffee. A few flasks came quickly out of suit coats, and the men in the crowd pushed back their chairs, waiting for the program to begin.

The former Clatonia coach Gene Else, acted as the Master of Ceremony. Al Riddington, Sports Editor of the *Beatrice Daily Sun*, gave the keynote address – “Remembering a Season that Will Never Be Forgotten.” Two 1922 Clatonia Cardinals Championship team members, Herb Riechers and Pete Steinmeyer, spoke and congratulated the team. Riechers gave each young player a framed black and white photo of the group. The photograph had captured the worn-out boys just after having won State.

## Coach Ihrig Speaks *Clatonia Gym – April 1958*



*Championship Certificate of Merit given to Coach Bob Ihrig by the Omaha World Herald*

When Coach Ihrig took his place behind the podium, the audience rose with cheers, whistles, and applause.

The first thing Bob did was to give Coach Else the credit for the 1957 – '58 Class D Nebraska State Basketball Championship. Gene Else had taught the boys how to play the game of basketball, and Bob was the lucky recipient to inherit a team that was championship-ready.

He gave a special thanks to Johnny Sagehorn, who was his constant source of guidance and inspiration. Whenever he needed something, it was Johnny who he turned to.

He showed everyone the certificate the *Omaha World Herald* had sent him. He told the players that they would never forget this year. Bob proclaimed that they were now officially legends in their hometown.

This team did do something extraordinary – they went 27 and 0. They won a State Championship. The record stood, and no one could change it.

Bob opened a bag he held up and pulled out pieces of the yard-long ruler he had used as a whip during practices. He had deliberately cut the ruler into several small pieces. When he called each player up, he handed them a portion of the ruler, a basketball certificate for lettering, and a red fabric “C” patch the boys could sew onto a jacket or sweater.

When each player came forward, Coach Ihrig granted them the opportunity to speak.

## **Players Speak** *Clatonia Gym – April 1958*

When the players stepped forward, they had some things to say about their coach.



*Front Row L to R: Coach Bob Ihrig, Harley Bergmeyer, Oren Miller, Ronnie Miller, Rodney Sagehorn, AlDean Blome  
Back Row L to R: Jim Heller, Bob Sykes, Bob Gerdes, Bill Schernikau, Tom Heller, Student Manager Richard Suiter*

Coach Ihrig taught us how to win. He lifted our self-esteem; he challenged us to go onto bigger and brighter futures.

Coach Ihrig didn't push us, he led us.

He did what he asked us to do. And, he was with us every step of the way.

Lots of coaches know the game of basketball. Lots of coaches can prepare you, but only the great ones can inspire you. Coach Ihrig inspired us and the result was a perfect season.

Coach Ihrig appeared hardnosed and vicious the way he talked to us players. But deep down he really did respect all of us. We learned a new language under him, which my parents did not appreciate. But he wanted us to reach our potential, not just for a state championship, but for the rest of our lives. He really did love all of us.

Coach was a super salesman. He sold each of us on his system. And it worked.

Coach Ihrig's voice was forceful. He took command. He knew what he wanted. The way he carried himself, confidence oozed out of him and into us. We loved him, too.

Coach made us into one of the smartest basketball teams in high school. He pounded it into our heads. He chewed us out. He screamed at us with choice words until we got it right.

We saw the sparkle in his eye the very first time he looked at us.

No coach has ever left an indelible mark on his players the way Coach Ihrig has left on us at Clatonia. None of us will ever forget him either – how could we?

Coach Ihrig taught me more about life than he will ever know. Thank you Coach.

It's not about me, it's about we. That's what Coach Ihrig taught us all.

## **Oren Miller – The Unsung Hero** *Clatonia Gym – April 1958*



*Coach Bob Ihrig and Oren Miller*

Rodney Sagehorn was the leading scorer, the star player, the All-Stater – and rightly so. His teammates believed Rodney deserved all his accolades, but they thought Oren Miller was the team's unsung hero. Oren had made the championship possible. Rodney was the glitter, and Oren was the glue that held the team together. He led the team in assists and rebounds so others could score. Oren accepted the role Coach Ihrig asked him to play and he played it brilliantly. He could have scored more points, but his role was to help others take easier shots so the team could win. He made everyone around him better, and he was the most unselfish player on the team.

Oren Miller was the general on the court.

## **A Night to Remember** *Clatonia Gym – April 1958*

After the speeches, it was time for music and dancing.

All night, heightened emotions were tugging at Bob's heart. He hoped everyone would understand why he had pushed and yelled so loud. Then they would know why he demanded what he had done. Winning is never easy.

As people approached Coach Ihrig to congratulate him, he apologized for putting the boys through rigorous practices. He had known what to do and apologetically admitted he had lost some chances of winning a championship before, referring to Otoe. He explained that he did what he did for the boys and the Village of Clatonia.

The highs of the evening began to wear off. For Bob, emotion was giving way to exhaustion. He was having pain in his heart, but he didn't want to appear to be weak. He knew what was happening and thought to himself that this was the worst possible time to have another attack of rheumatic fever.

But sometimes, life isn't fair. Bob knew that for a certainty.

## **Doctor's Order**

*Lincoln, Nebraska – Late April 1958*

Then, in the spring of 1958, Bob received several job offers to coach at larger schools with considerable salary increases. But he worried about how he was feeling and a growing weakness affecting his mind, soul, and body.

Knowing what was wrong, he made an appointment with a specialist in Lincoln. He wanted confirmation and hoped the doctors had found a treatment for rheumatic fever.

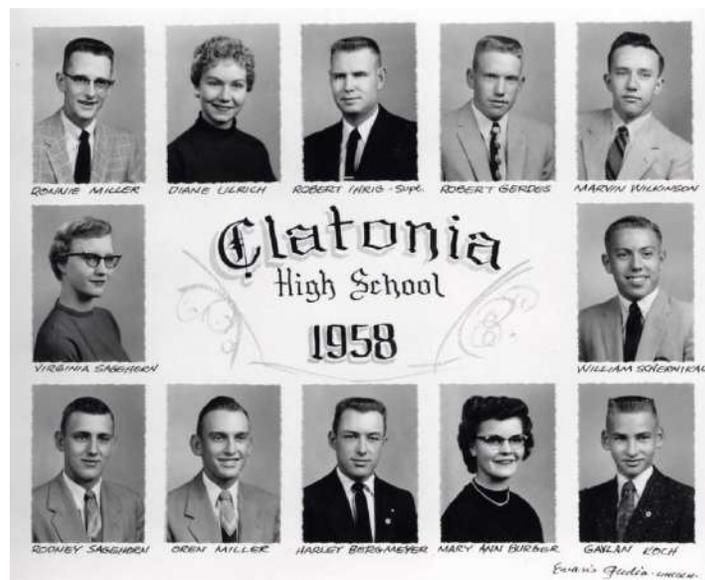
But it was not good news.

The physician leveled with him, "I'll tell you straight up, this is serious, Coach Ihrig. I'm warning you that as your doctor, you have to quit coaching, or you won't be around this time next year. Your heart just can't take it anymore."

Bob listened and took what the doctor said to heart. He agreed to quit coaching. Bob knew his heart couldn't take it any longer. He would start making plans.

When he returned home to Clatonia, he told Maisy and his children what the doctor had said and that he would have to stop coaching. It was the first time the family saw him cry. He longed to continue doing what he loved, but it would be the end of his life if he tried. There had to be something else he could do and enjoy. But what that *something* was at the moment – he had no clue.

## **Finishing the Year** *Clatonia, Nebraska – May 1958*



*Clatonia Senior Class – 1958*

While Clatonia was still reveling in the basketball championship, Bob was gearing up for his final coaching duty, which consisted of starting a new track program. He wished now he hadn't suggested it to the board, but he had committed, so he felt obligated to do the job even though his energy level was dropping rapidly.

When Bob asked the school board to start a track program, he argued that spring track would prepare the boys for fall football. In the same way, football prepared them for basketball.

At home, Maisey was anticipating another move with dread. If Bob quit coaching, she knew they would not be staying in Clatonia, and it would be the tenth move in their short married life. She knew they had to get away. She understood her husband would not want anyone to see him once the fever took control of his body.

Devastated by his health issues, Bob hoped he could make it till the end of the year. He began to sit in his office with the door shut. He wanted no one to see him grimacing in pain.

As the senior class sponsor, he organized the annual sneak day. It also meant he would be one of the chaperones. Bob and two other drivers set out with twelve graduating seniors, heading for the Black Hills and Mt. Rushmore. From South Dakota, they journeyed to Denver, Colorado, where they took a helicopter ride along the Front Range. During the ride they saw a bird's eye view of Red Rocks Amphitheater and Buffalo Bill's grave. On Sunday morning, the classmates attended an early sunrise service at Red Rocks, and then it was time to head home.

Back in Clatonia, Bob was to be the host of the graduation ceremony.

## **Bob's Replacement**

*Clatonia, Nebraska – Mid May 1958*



*Coach Gene Else*

Throughout the year, Bob and Gene Else had kept in contact. Bob had leaned on the former coach for advice and guidance, yet the two men were opposites. Bob used language that Gene would have never considered using. Bob was emotional, Gene was careful and calculated.

Bob wanted to keep coaching but knew he had to stop. Gene missed coaching and didn't like working for the government. He wanted to coach again.

It was up to Bob to hire faculty, including finding his replacement, but he didn't have to look far. He knew Gene wasn't happy. The Elses needed a break from teaching and coaching a year ago. The year away helped them realize teaching and coaching was their life's calling.

Enthusiastically, Gene Else was ready to resume the superintendent, teacher, and coach role. And Virginia Else was prepared to take back her duties as a high school teacher.

Bob didn't know what he would do or where they would go, but he wanted to make a quick exit. Bob had had the fever three times, and he knew what it would do to his body. The last thing he wanted was to change from a vibrant, active coach to a living skeleton in front of those who mattered so much to him.

With Bud and June still in Holdrege, it seemed the perfect time to ask a huge favor. Bob asked if Maisy and the kids could come and stay with them for a week or so while he decided what he would do going forward.

The Warners agreed, and they banded together a plan.

## **Jerry Gorton** *Otoe, Nebraska – Late May 1958*

The burden of supporting a family and a recurring illness weighed heavily on Bob, but he still took the time to write a former player to see how his season had panned out. There was a time when Coach Ihrig had urged Jerry Gorton to transfer to Clatonia. He was a talented starting guard, a skilled ball handler, and he could babysit the small Ihrig children. But Jerry felt he owed it to his parents and his hometown to say in Otoe and play out his final season for the Wildcats.

Jerry was the leading scorer for Otoe. The team went 10 and 8, then lost in districts. But it was the final year for Otoe High since the school closed and consolidated with Syracuse. Jerry was content with his decision but congratulated his old coach for winning a State Championship.

## **Coach of the Year** *Lincoln, Nebraska – May 1958*



*Coach of the Year – Don McKillip – Red Willow Zephyrs*

Several supporters lobbied for Coach Bob Ihrig to be named Coach of the Year. Al Riddington of the *Beatrice Daily Sun* and Jack Anderson of the *Nebraska City News Press* had both attended the Class D Championship Game and had voted for Bob.

But Coach Don McKillip of the Red Willow Zephyrs was named Coach of the Year by the *Lincoln Journal* for the 1957 – '58 school year. It was the first time a coach from a Class D school was so honored. In football, the Zephyrs ended the year ranked #2 in the State for 8-man football. It was the first year the team had switched from 6-man to 8-man football. In basketball the Zephyrs ended the year ranked #2. Red Willow went on to win the State Championship in Class D for track. Coach McKillip's accomplishments were more than impressive.

Bob called Don and congratulated McKillip for an honor well deserved.

## **Leigh, Nebraska**

### *Leigh, Nebraska – Summer 1958*



*Bob and family in Leigh, Nebraska during the summer of 1958*

One year of brilliance and excellence, then in a flash, it was all gone.

One minute you are “somebody,” and everybody wants a little piece of your time. Then life changes, and suddenly, no one knows who you are, and you’re a “nobody.”

After the family left Clatonia, Bob felt like a “nobody.” He was trying to run away from his bad heart, but his heart was still damaged.

Bob and Maisy had moved to Clatonia with very little and left with little more. Yet he accomplished what he had set out to do – to win a state championship. He was proud of that, and he knew he could coach, and that alone carried him through the rest of his short life.

There was no good-bye to anyone and no farewell party. Bob didn’t want any of that, so they snuck out of town during the night. Nobody knew they had left town except for Johnny and Lois Sagehorn. Maisy had confided in Lois. The coach who had brought pride to the Village of Clatonia was there one day, and then he was gone for good, and everyone wondered why.

While the family stayed with Bud and June, Bob went to Lincoln and visited with Lincoln Liberty Life. He had worked for the company during summers since his days at Kearney State Teachers College. Was there an open territory for him? There was one in Leigh, Nebraska, so Bob quickly went to find a house to rent.

So it went, and during the summer of 1958, Bob talked about life insurance, all while not feeling well and growing weaker with each passing day. He had very little energy and was deeply depressed. He knew selling insurance could be lucrative, but it was not a very stimulating career.

He missed teaching, coaching, camaraderie, and being “somebody.”

## **Carl Ihrig’s Visit** *Leigh, Nebraska – Late Summer 1958*



*Carl Ihrig working for United Airlines in NYC in the sign department*

Later that summer, Carl Ihrig surprised his son with a telephone call. The two had not spoken in years. Carl had returned to Goodland, Kansas, to attend a family reunion. Being in the general vicinity, he stopped in Holdrege to visit his daughter, June, and her family. Then he drove to Leigh to see Bob and his family.

The visit was cordial, but Bob still had not forgiven his father. The time together did little to mend their relationship.

Grandpa Carl took Pammy Sue downtown to buy her some candy during the stay. As long as he was downtown, he stopped at a liquor store and then took his granddaughter to the park. While Pammy Sue ate her candy, Grandpa Carl drank from a small brown paper sack. After a time, he smiled at Pammy Sue and conspired: “Now, don’t tell your parents what we did.”

When Carl first moved to New York City, he accepted a job with United Airlines as an airplane mechanic. Later on, due to his natural artistic abilities, he switched jobs and started working in the sign department for the airlines.

During the visit, Carl told the family that he drove a limousine for United Airlines in addition to the sign artwork. Driving VIPs for the airlines was a great use of Carl's skill for pleasing people.

While driving the limousine, Carl met Miss Patty Page when she was in New York City. Sometime later, Miss Page asked Carl to become her personal limousine driver when she was in town. He loved being in the big city and hinted to folks that his relationship with Miss Page was more than just business.

Bob didn't believe a word of what his father said and thought Carl was blowing smoke. It was the last time Bob saw his father.

## **Hospitalized**

### *Leigh, Nebraska – Fall 1958*

Selling insurance had become a struggle for Bob. By early fall, the pain in his heart had intensified, so he went to the hospital with his fourth episode of rheumatic fever.

During his inpatient stay, Bob struck up an unlikely friendship with a local Catholic priest. Father Kenneth Carl was the pastor of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Leigh. The priest visited the coach in the evenings and read the Bible to his new charge. Father Carl took time to talk to Bob and answer all his questions. He seemed to have numerous questions, but Father Carl took his time and laid out the beliefs one by one.

Then, over Thanksgiving, Bob's condition worsened. The doctors didn't give much hope for improvement. The fever was alarming. The once-strong young coach couldn't raise his hands and arms to feed himself. The weight fell off his body like melted butter.

Bob asked for the sacrament of last rites to be performed. But before the priest administered the sacrament, Bob wanted baptism into the Roman Catholic Church.

His prognosis grew dimmer. The medical team advised Maisy to start looking into burial options and talk about funeral arrangements.

## **1958 - 1959 Clatonia Cardinals** **Clatonia, Nebraska – Winter 1958**



**Front Row LtoR: Coach Gene Else, Tom Heller, Terry Koch, Bob Sykes, Jim Heller, AlDean Blome, Richard Suiter Student Manager**  
**Top Row LtoR: Larry Vonderfecht, Neil Auman, Paul Heller, Dennis Albert, Kenny Holsing**

Shortly before Christmas, something miraculous happened; Bob's condition slowly improved. Day by day, he started to gain back a little weight and strength. With help from the nurses, he sat up in bed and then asked his wife to bring in a radio.

He flipped through the stations and listened to whatever basketball game he could find, which helped strengthen his weak body. He started to read the newspaper to catch up on his old team, the Clatonia Cardinals, and Coach Gene Else.

The Cardinals had started the season off slowly. Midway through the year, the team had a record of 8 wins and six losses. Then, the team started to spark and went on a winning streak. They won the last five games of the regular season. Entering district play, the team rattled off three more victories, beating Holmesville to take home the district championship trophy. In the first round of regionals, the Cardinals upset Sprague-Martell Central, setting up a regional finals

match against Beaver Crossing. Again, the Beavers played a stalling game and kept the score low. The Beavers prevailed, sending the Cardinals home with a record of 17 and 7.

The team did better than most people expected, making it to the regional finals.

## **Red Willow Zephyrs Lincoln, Nebraska – Late Winter 1959**



**Red Willow Zephyrs 1959 Class D State Champions**

As the new year state tournament began, Bob listened to the team he had faced last year in the finals. The Red Willow Zephyrs entered the tournament with a lone loss. It had come early in the year against their arch rival, the Chiefs of Indianola.

In the first game at State, Red Willow beat Snyder. In the finals, Red Willow met the Beavers of Beaver Crossing. The Zephyrs prevailed, 63 to 59, winning their first State Basketball Championship.

Earlier in the year, Red Willow had been undefeated in football and won the Class D State Championship in 8-man football. Later in the year, Red Willow would win the Class D State Championship in track. It was the only time one school has won three major championships in a single year.

When asked which squad was better, the 1957 – ‘58 team, who came in second to Clatonia, or the 1958 – ‘59 team, who won a State Championship? Overwhelmingly, Red

Willow players vouched for the 1957- '58 team. That year the squad had more depth. They also had Burdette Malleck as the starting guard and leading scorer. He became an All-Stater.

Gaining strength, Bob sent Red Willow Coach Don McKillip a congratulations card.

## **#22 – One Final Favor** **Leigh, Nebraska – Spring 1959**

By the spring of 1959, the doctor discharged Bob from the hospital. He had gained weight and strength, but Father Kenneth Carl had one final favor to ask the former coach before he walked out on that last day. The priest wanted Bob to help St. Francis, a parochial school in Humphrey, Nebraska, start a new football program. Father Carl knew about Bob's accomplishments, and since he had initiated several football programs, the priest thought St. Francis could use a little assistance from someone who had done it before. Bob agreed and helped the new coach get the program off the ground on a volunteer basis.

## **#23 – Schuyler, Nebraska** ***Schuyler, Nebraska – Spring 1959***

Slow and skinny, Bob returned home. He was grateful for the recovery and humbled by Father Carl's support. For family unity, Bob wanted his family baptized Roman Catholic. Father Kenneth Carl performed all the baptisms at St. Mary's in Leigh.

Without money coming in, the family couldn't afford the house in Leigh, so Bob began a search for a new place to live. Rentals were hard to come by, and the only place he could find was a small farmhouse on the outskirts of Schuyler, Nebraska. There was a small barn and rabbit cages near the house. Maisy decided to raise rabbits and chickens to help bring in money.

Schuyler was a larger town than Leigh and was the county seat of Colfax County, about 30 miles south of Leigh. Bob thought the larger town might be a better place to sell insurance.

But he looked seriously unwell, and it seemed people were afraid to open the door to one who looked as he did. The results were devastating, and he sold very few policies in Schuyler.

Bob sank deeper into depression. Having been so recently a local hero, Bob had lost his confidence, and it became a burden to make the calls. He lost his edge and his desire to go out and sell.

There was an alfalfa plant in the country, not far from where the family lived. Bob took a job driving an alfalfa truck to secure a steady income, but he hated every minute of it.

The kids enrolled in Schuyler Public School for the last couple of months of the year. After school, they would wave to their father as he drove by. He was dirty and dingy, and they knew he was not happy by the scowl on his face.

Bob's health issues continued. He was in a miserable funk and lay awake at night, praying for a new life.

## **1959 Rambler Station Wagon** *Schuyler, Nebraska – Late Spring 1959*

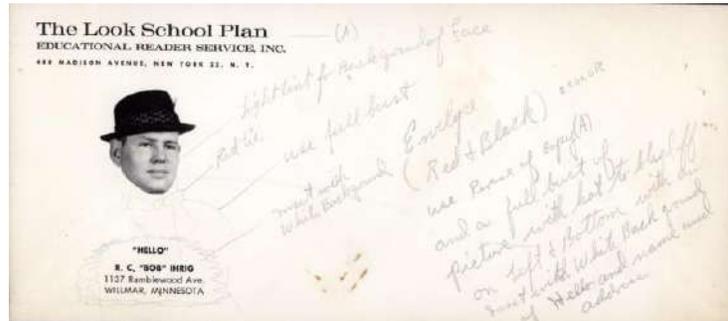
Every day, Bob sent letters to prospective employers with his résumé, trying to find an extraordinary job with decent pay and a measure of fulfillment. He could hardly manage the cost of postage, but he had no other choice.

Late one afternoon, he pulled into the farmyard with a brand-spanking new pink and white Rambler station wagon. Maisy rushed out of the house, demanding to know what this was all about. To lift his spirits, Bob had bought a new car. The old car had been having lots of repairs. An argument ensued, which had become more and more commonplace.

Bob had just received a response from a company about a job opening. It seemed the company was about to offer him a job; if they did, he would accept it. It would require lots of traveling, and Bob would need a new car.

Maisy was not at all happy. New job. New car. New place. All she did was pack and unpack boxes.

## **Look Magazine** *New York City – Early Summer 1959*



*The Look School Plan*

As a school administrator, Bob had been involved in various fundraising activities, including magazine sales. Students sold magazine subscriptions to parents and grandparents, friends and neighbors. Money for the school was the primary motivation, and it was fun for students. Sales work usually came easily for Bob, and he spawned the idea to work with schools in a different capacity.

Educational Readers Service's corporate offices were in New York City, and Bob interviewed with a district manager. They needed a salesman in Minnesota and Iowa, meaning the family would need to relocate to Willmar, Minnesota.

*Look Magazine* was the push. It was a bi-weekly magazine, and Educational Readers Service wanted a large readership. The Look School Plan also offered hundreds of other magazine subscriptions. The variety of magazines and various price points made it a perfect fundraiser.

## **1137 Ramblewood Avenue** *Willmar, Minnesota – Summer 1959*



*New car, new home, new boat, all in Willmar, Minnesota*

Just like that, the family headed north to Willmar, Minnesota, “the Land of 10,000 Lakes.” The town lay in the south-central part of the state. The natural wildlife areas were growing, and Willmar had already surpassed a population of 10,000.

In trying to find a place to rent, Bob met with a realtor who told him it might be cheaper to own than rent. There was a new developed section of town with several completed homes that were move-in ready. With his service in the Army, he could get favorable financing through the Veterans Administration. Not wanting to pass up a good opportunity, Bob and Maisy decided to buy their first home at 1137 Ramblewood Avenue. The ranch-style house had three bedrooms, a spacious living area, and an unfinished basement.

With renewed energy, Bob hit the road with gusto. The new job took him to one school after another through Minnesota and Iowa, where he started fundraising programs across the territory. Thousands of students sold magazine subscriptions, and the results were spectacular. Bob quickly became one of the top salesmen in the company.

A few blocks from Ramblewood Avenue sat St. Mary’s Catholic School, where the children were enrolled. The family became St. Mary’s Church members, and Bob joined the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal organization that focused on community needs.

Without the pressure of coaching sports every night, Bob had time to fish and hunt. He and Maisy joined a bowling league, and Bob took up golf. He reasoned that walking around on a golf course was the best possible exercise for his heart.

In the following months, new furniture arrived on Ramblewood Avenue. Then, next to the newly built home and the shiny two-toned pink and white Rambler station wagon, Bob parked a sleek new speedboat in the driveway. By all appearances, a sales career was much more lucrative than coaching.

You'd think the old coach was rolling in the dough!

## **The Jaycees** *Willmar, Minnesota – Fall 1959*

Bowling and golf put Bob in contact with other younger men in the community. Several were members of the Jaycees, and they encouraged Bob to join the group. Bob's outgoing personality made them feel he would be a great asset to their community-minded organization.

The Jaycees was a non-profit organization emphasizing leadership training and service to the community. It was open to men between the ages of 18 and 36.

Bob was 31 years old, and he would fit right in. Enthusiastically, he joined the group and found its mission fulfilling.

Jaycee members didn't take long to learn about Bob's accomplishments as a coach. Soon, new friends were visiting the ex-coach at his new home. They enjoyed hearing his basketball stories and the shake-up of the Charles Starkweather murders.

Some guys stepped forward to help the Ihrigs build a garage. Next, they helped finish the unfinished basement with wood paneling, a small bar, a kitchenette, a bedroom, and an office. Consequently, Bob and Maisy would host the next New Year's Eve party, an event for young couples to drink and dance and party the night away.

Some wondered why Bob quit coaching and teaching; he pretended he had accomplished what he had set out to do. He hinted that one reason he left was because the pay was poor. He pretended he didn't miss it. That was not true either. Yes, the hours had been long, and the income wasn't great, but it was something he loved to do.

No one would know about his heart if it were up to Bob.

## **Nominated Twice**

### *Willmar, Minnesota – Winter 1960*

Life was speeding forward, and Bob pushed hard as ever, working, playing, attending meetings, and taking on new responsibilities. Even though he was one of the newest Jaycee members, the other men voted for Bob to be the Vice President of the local chapter.

Later that winter, a member presented an idea to help the community during one Jaycee meeting. There was a home for troubled boys in Willmar. The boys, primarily high school age, were sent there for various reasons. The Jaycee member stood and spoke, "When we organize our summer baseball league, maybe we can include these unfortunate kids. With nothing better for them to do but run the streets and get into trouble, it's no wonder things don't improve much in their lives. Let's invite them to join our team. Playing sports has always been one of the best ways for young men to experience something positive."

The Jaycees unanimously agreed to invite the boys to join their summer baseball team.

As enthusiasm for the project gained momentum, another Jaycee piped up, "Who is more qualified to coach this team, than our own state championship winner – Coach Bob Ihrig? I motion to nominate Bob to be our coach. It would be a great experience for these boys to be coached by a real coach."

Again, the nomination was unanimous.

None of the Jaycees had any hesitation about Bob's abilities. He had never been shy about his coaching record and his teams in Nebraska. He had saved newspaper clippings and photos, and when he described the events of those seasons, it was like listening to Harry Caray announcing a St. Louis Cardinals' baseball game. The guys were thoroughly entertained.

## **Veterans Administration Hospital** *Minneapolis, Minnesota – Early Spring 1960*



*Veterans Administration Hospital in Minneapolis, Minnesota*

Bob had found again the satisfaction of fitting in and being appreciated. He knew he should slow down, yet he wanted to live normally and do something meaningful. But his hectic schedule would have consequences. By spring, he began to show signs of wearing down. Then, the familiar burn returned to his heart. The fever crept slowly in. This time, Bob wanted to seek out medical help before his condition spiraled out of control.

In secret, Bob contacted the local Veterans Service Officer and explained his health history and concerns. They referred him to the Veterans Administration Hospital in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where the doctors on staff admitted him and agreed to run some tests.

There had been advancements in treating rheumatic fever, like the discovery of penicillin. Modern medications helped slow down the fever. Tests showed how badly damaged the heart had become from the previous bouts of rheumatic fever. Doctors emphasized his need for rest.

In the hospital, Bob wrote his mother nearly every day. He wrote a letter to his father to mend their relationship.

He sent a card to his friend and mentor back in Nebraska. Coach Cornie Collins' team had just won the Class A State Basketball Championship. The Omaha South Packers, with their seven-foot center, Bill Vincent, had a sensational year. Bob hoped Cornie had cooled down from the last time their teams scrimmaged.

## **Carl Ihrig's Death** *New York City, New York – Late Spring 1960*



*Carl Ihrig at LaGuardia Airport in NYC*

Bob received a letter from his father while he was hospitalized in Minneapolis. Carl was ill and was also in the hospital. He had been battling cancer for some time. Carl's older sister, Viola, had traveled to New York City to help her brother during his last few months.

Once June learned of her father's hospitalization, she flew to New York City to see him. When she arrived at the hospital, Viola told the nurses Carl had no children. Sadly, June was forbidden to see her father. He died the next day, on May 13, 1960.

Carl had taken out a company life insurance policy with United Airlines and listed June Warner as the sole beneficiary of the \$10,000 policy. Viola was outraged when she learned her brother had not left her the money. She tried to get June to turn over the money since she had cared for Carl during his last months. June refused and the rift within the family widened.

Bob did not receive an inheritance from his father. Instead, Viola sent Bob a couple of boxes with some of Carl's belongings. One box contained a large assortment of autographed albums released by Miss Patty Page. There were records by Louis Armstrong and Nat King

Cole. Carl had never lost his love of music. Bob wondered if his Dad had told him the truth about his life and work.

Inside the boxes were bills from Carl's funeral, which Viola would not pay. She felt Bob and June should be responsible for their father's final expenses, which included the body's transportation back to Johnson, Nebraska.

Rather than being buried in the Zion Lutheran Cemetery, founded by his grandfather, Carl was buried next to his mother in the Johnson City Cemetery. No peace in living and none in dying.

## **Jaycee Baseball Practice** *Willmar, Minnesota – Late Spring 1960*

Bob felt refreshed once he left the hospital and he felt optimistic that his length of stay was shorter than in the past.

As for coaching, he knew he shouldn't be coaching again, but it was difficult for him to tell his new friends why he should not coach.

Foolishly, he pushed caution to the wind and went ahead and coached. It was just a volunteer coaching position. The team was only an amateur group of young men from the civic-minded Jaycees and some of Willmar Boys' Home boys. But according to Bob, when winning was a stake, you'd have thought it was Notre Dame or the Green Bay Packers, the way he put his heart and soul into this charity project.

Gathering on the practice field, the boys looked like a back alley, ragtag group of misfits. They showed up in sloppy cutoffs, tennis shoes, sleeveless tees, and there wasn't a recent haircut among them. They were slow to trust the Jaycees, and the Jaycees had a hard time dealing with the boys' crude lack of social graces.

Practices in late spring went on as scheduled. Bob demanded everyone practice hard, quickly whipping the team into shape. He took them from a disorganized, chaotic team to a disciplined, functioning unit who jointly showed a measure of pride and confidence in what they were accomplishing. Bob could pull out the best in each kid and match him to the position best suited to his talents.

Team practices were well-organized. Fellow Jaycees helped as assistant coaches. Wives and daughters soon joined the effort, bringing sandwiches, Coca-Cola, and cookies. The boys were learning the fringe benefits of their status as local athletes and were developing comradery.

Bob ensured new equipment arrived so the team had the best advantage possible. Then, before the season's first game, Bob hauled several considerable boxes in the Rambler to the final practice session. Inside the boxes were brand new, honest-to-god baseball uniforms, with the Jaycee script sewed across the front in blue tack-twill lettering, just like the big league teams.

Each player was issued spikes, high-top baseball socks, flannel pants, matching shirts, and a fitted cap. Bob had learned the importance of team presentation. If the players looked great, they felt great. And if they felt great, they played great. Furthermore, if they played great – more often than not – they won!

## **The Ballpark** *Willmar, Minnesota – Early Summer 1960*

It was a memorable time. The ballpark was a common gathering place for the folks of Willmar on hot summer evenings. If there was no breeze, the crowd waved the humid air around with cardboard hand fans. A partially rotted roof covered the old wooden bleachers, and the crackling metal loudspeakers were mounted on tall poles. An announcer sat behind chicken wire to protect against foul balls.

The Jaycees started the season with a couple of thrilling wins.

At each game, halfway through the innings, the old codger at the microphone made a similar announcement: “Good evening, baseball fans. What another exciting night at the ballpark. As you will notice, the Jaycees are playin’, and have a new tradition. They started it just this year. We have some fine young men helping us pass around buckets. Now, I know you’re all wonderin’ what in the Sam Hill’s goin’ on. Well, it’s like church. We’re takin’ up an offering. And just so everybody knows it, all the money is stayin’ right here in town. Yes, sir. It goes to the boys’ home. They can use our help. So, please be generous.”

Later, during the game, Bob was on the mound pitching. He was a player-coach, and his competitive juices ran at full tilt. He threw one of his fast pitches from the mound, and as he released the ball, he went limp, collapsed, and hit the ground.

The crowd rose to their feet. The only sound for several seconds was a collective gasp.

Bob lay motionless.

Several Jaycees ran to the mound, knelt over him and one screamed, “Get an ambulance!”

Maisy and Bobby Mark were in the stands and neither said a word. She was white as a ghost, with both hands over her mouth.

## **Pronounced Dead**

### ***Willmar, Minnesota – Early Summer 1960***

Finally, the ambulance arrived. The paramedics attending to Bob on the pitcher’s mound pronounced Robert Carl Ihrig – dead at the ball field. They put him on a stretcher, gently lifted him into the ambulance, and hauled him away. Maisy had not moved from her seat. One of the Jaycees climbed the bleachers and told her, “I’m sorry, Maisy, he’s gone.”

No sirens were blaring, no lights flashing, and no rush. As the first responders drove back to the hospital, they assumed they were transporting a body to the morgue. What they

didn't realize, was that Bob was still alive. He couldn't move, speak, or open his eyes. His respirations and heartbeat were scarcely noticeable – so they presumed him dead.

It was only when an orderly curiously pulled back the sheet to see the young man who had died, that he noticed movement in Bob's fingers. He was mustering every ounce of strength to move his right index finger.

The long and short of it was Bob had suffered a heart attack. After the conclusion of a boatload of medical procedures, the doctor declared, "You need open-heart surgery, now!"

Taking Bob's wife aside, the doctor spoke candidly. "Maisy, without surgery, there is not much hope for Bob. But the procedure is new and there is so much we still don't understand about the human heart. He may live only six months after surgery, if he's lucky."

Bob and Maisy put their confidence in the Veterans Administration, but there weren't many other options open. The Army would cover the medical costs because of Bob's service. So in June, they traveled again to the V.A. Hospital in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where Bob underwent one of the earliest open-heart operations on June 29, 1960.

## **10% Chance of Survival** *Minneapolis, Minnesota – June 1960*



*Bob Ihrig at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Minneapolis*

The doctors were honest with Bob and told him that open-heart surgeries were still in their infancy. A few had been performed over the past ten years, but they were all hit and miss. Only a handful had been successful. They gave him a ten percent chance of survival.

Fifty-three volunteers had opted to have open-heart surgery before Bob. Fifty-one died on the operating table. Two men lived six months, but they never left the hospital. Bob was the fifty-fourth volunteer. Truthfully, the odds were more like a four percent chance of survival.

Bob's mother, Clara, and his sister, June, traveled to Minneapolis to be with Bob. Before wheeling him into the operating room, they held hands and with tears flowing from their eyes, he muttered, "I'll see you after the operation, and if not, I'll see you on the other side."

## **Slow Recovery**

### ***Minneapolis, Minnesota – Late Fall 1960***

Bob was barely conscious for weeks. The doctors had removed the heart from his body and operated on three of his heart valves to try and repair the leakage. During surgery, Bob received forty-eight pints of blood. He remained in critical condition for several months.

Maisy drove from Willmar to Minneapolis every chance she could. The ordeal took its toll on the family, so she loaded the four kids into the Rambler and drove to Nebraska, leaving Pammy Sue and Kimmy Louise at Clara's small trailer in McCook. Bobby Mark and Roger Royal would stay with the Chitwoods, Verl and Faye, on their small farm in Indianola. For how long, nobody knew.

The doctors were realistic with Bob, but became more optimistic when the patient improved daily. One morning, when the cardiologist had completed his exam, Bob announced, "When I get out of here, I'm going to buy a golf course. You need to promise to come play a game of golf with me."

Of course, the doctor agreed. Why put a damper on such positive thinking? But he honestly didn't think Bob would ever be able to pick up a putter, let alone swing a golf club.

As more time passed, the cardiologist began to talk about hospital discharge and lifestyle changes. Bob would have to give up cigarettes, alcohol, and salt. And, he needed to rest.

Finally, in the late fall of 1960, Bob was the first survivor of open-heart surgery to walk out of the V.A. hospital – albeit on crutches. Maisy delivered him to Nebraska, where the children were eagerly waiting to see their father.

Maisy helped her husband out of the car while the children stood quietly. He was frightfully pale and skinny as a rail. He was still weak, and his chest was very tender. No one dared touch him.

## **Resting with Well Wishers** *Willmar, Minnesota – Winter 1961*



*Bob resting in Willmar with a cigarette in hand*

The effort to keep Bob's heart issues a secret was futile. Soon, a line of friends were at the house to wish him well. A new recliner was parked in the living room so he could visit with his Jaycee buddies and Knights of Columbus comrades. Many offered to help Bob and Maisy with anything.

The doctors told Bob to rest and stop smoking and drinking. The drinking was no problem to give up, but smoking was another matter. Bob had asked Maisy to stop smoking, not only to save money but to help him quit. She didn't want to give up cigarettes. He tried several times to quit, but eventually he stopped trying. He switched to Salem, thinking the menthol brands were safer.

As puffs of smoke floated in the air, Bob considered the wisdom of whether or not he should be smoking. He knew it was wrong for his heart and believed the warnings that the doctor's had given him. Nicotine is addictive. But with no support from Maisy, he might as well enjoy the darn things because, on some level, the cigarettes calmed him down. The doctors weren't happy that he did not give up smoking, but they agreed to make him a test case on the effects of smoking after open-heart surgery.

The doctors also advised a no-salt diet. Bob loved salt. Maisy followed the doctor's orders and didn't give him salt. She substituted *Mrs. Dash*, but Bob didn't like it. "If I have to eat this goddamned bland food, I might as well be dead."

## **Recreation and Relaxation**

### ***Willmar, Minnesota – Spring 1961***



*The Ihrig Cabin on Green Lake*

Bob enjoyed being outdoors, and when he was strong enough, he went outside for some fresh air and a little exercise. Fishing in Minnesota is a year-round activity. So when an opportunity presented itself to buy a fishing hut at a reasonable price, Bob reasoned that being able to ice fish for the last couple months of winter would help with his recovery. It would allow him to spend quality time with friends and family.

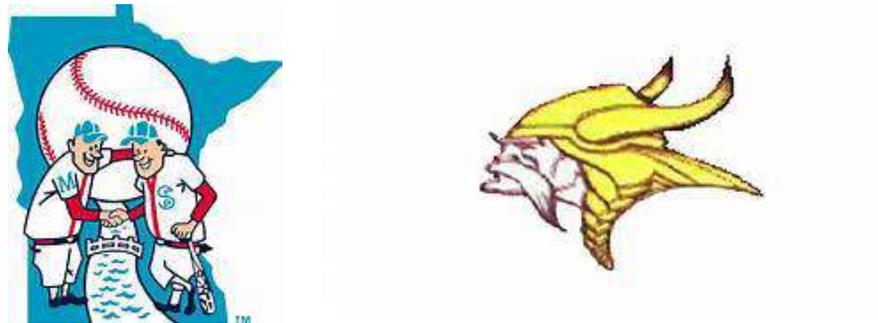
As spring rolled around, Bob was back on the road with the Look School Plan, although he didn't push himself as hard as he had in the past. The company had been understanding and supportive.

Bob was going to put a higher value on recreation and relaxation. Anything to reduce stress is what he was striving to accomplish. He decided to buy a cabin on Green Lake. The chance to swim, fish, lie in the sun, water ski, and host family outings was something that he thought would be best for his recovery and happiness.

Green Lake was the largest lake near Willmar. It was a deep lake with good water clarity and a greenish color because of the high algae content. Green Lake was home to a variety of fish species, including Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, Smallmouth Bass, and Walleye.

The family made good use of the cabin at Green Lake. Sister June and her family visited a couple of times, as did the Sagehorns from Clatonia.

## **Two New Sports Franchises** *Minneapolis, St. Paul, Minnesota – Spring and Fall of 1961*



*Minnesota Twins and Minnesota Vikings*

For the sports enthusiast, you could not have picked a better time to live in Minnesota than in 1961. Two new major sporting franchises started play in the Land of 10,000 Lakes that year.

It began when the Washington Senators decided to relocate their baseball franchise to the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Rather than use the name of a city to identify the team, they chose to name the team after the state with a reference to the two cities – Minnesota Twins.

Hamm's Beer became an official sponsor of the Twins and Bob started decorating his basement bar with Hamm's beer signs. He wasn't supposed to be drinking alcohol; but he did take pleasure in drinking a Hamm's or two while listening to the newly formed Twins of Minnesota.

The team brought with them a nucleus of talented players: Harmon Killebrew, Bobby Allison, Camilo Pascual, Zoilo Versalles, Jim Kaat, Earl Battey, and Lenny Green. Their record that first year was 70 wins and 90 losses. The Twins set a new attendance record, which testified of their support. Bob found tickets that summer to see a Twins baseball game, and for Bobby Mark's birthday, Bob took his oldest son and Pammy Sue to a game in August.

Then in the fall of 1961, the Minnesota Vikings played their first season in the National Football League. The Vikings were an expansion franchise and became the league's fourteenth team. Their inaugural regular season opener was a 37–13 victory at home over the Chicago Bears. Rookie quarterback Fran Tarkenton came off the bench to toss four touchdown passes and he ran for another. Under new head coach, Norm Van Brocklin, the Vikings won just two of their remaining 13 games and finished the season with a 3 and 11 record.

Minnesota was now in the big leagues. Support for these two new franchises was nothing short of spectacular. Bob was thrilled to witness the beginning of these two teams and he became an avid fan of both the Twins and the Vikings.

## **Christmas of '61**

### *Willmar, Minnesota – Winter 1961*

It didn't take long, and Bob was back at it, working harder than ever. He wanted to make Christmas of 1961 extra special with everything that had transpired. He knew he hadn't spent enough time with the family, so she tried to make up for it by buying an excessive amount of gifts for everyone.



*Bobby Mark, Pammy Sue, Kimmy Louise, and Roger Royal in front of a new color television set*

Pammy Sue received a Dansette record player that played both albums and 45s, along with several hit records Bob picked out. Soon afterwards, her girlfriends were at the house enjoying music. Bobby Mark got a massive Lionel Train Set with buildings and tunnels mounted on large panel boards. He also received a Wilson catcher's mitt. Kimmy Louise received a new Barbie doll and a Siamese cat she named Midnight. Roger Royal received a brand new Schwinn bicycle with all the bells and whistles and a fancy snow sled.

Maisy received a new bowling ball and some much needed utensils for the kitchen.

The grandest gift was a beautiful new color television set. Bob parked it in the spacious living room under a new T.V. lamp. The children could finally watch all the shows in living color. The height of modern living was to see the *Mickey Mouse Club* in color.

## **Operation Snowflake** *Willmar, Minnesota – Winter 1962*

Bob piled more duties with responsibilities on himself with the local Jaycees and the Knights of Columbus. He had taken over the presidency of the local Jaycees. He was willing to do anything to help make the small city more inviting and comfortable.

The Jaycees brought popular musical groups to the city auditorium to help raise money for their outreach programs. One such group was the popular Ink Spots. Bob was the Master of Ceremony, and he introduced the talented musicians to the people of Willmar.



*Bob Ihrig introduces the new Operation Snowflake Queen, Julie Carlson, for 1962*

Bob had co-chaired the annual Operation Snowflake Campaign during the last two years. The Jaycees sponsored the community drive to collect used coats and clothing for the Indian Tribes of Granite Falls and Red Lake, Minnesota for several years. He poured his heart into these community events, doing what he could to help make Willmar a better place for all.

## **Minnesota's National Director** *Willmar, Minnesota – Spring 1962*

As Bob's popularity grew in the local chapter of Jaycees, supporters pushed hard for his nomination to become Minnesota's National Director at the Jaycees National Convention. After

members heard about his coaching background and his survival of open-heart surgery, he was elected as the first Willmarite to serve the Jaycees nationally.



*Bob Ihrig elected to serve as a National Director for the Jaycees*

Realizing the opportunity the Jaycees had given him, Bob started questioning the time he was spending out of town. He did enjoy his work with the *Look Plan*. The income was generous, but he did not like the long hours on the road. Often, he would leave early Monday morning and not return home until late on Friday evening. Being gone so much did not give him the time he wanted to devote to the Jaycees, the Knights of Columbus, or his family.

Several friends were encouraging Bob to run for city council. He had never seriously considered such an endeavor, but the more he contemplated running for political office, the more attracted he became to the challenge and the potential benefits.

## **Lincoln Liberty Life**

### ***Willmar, Minnesota – Early Summer 1962***

Bob thought about a political future and began to embrace the idea. No one would vote for a traveling salesman who was rarely in town. But if he owned a business that served the community, that would surely get the attention of some residents. His enthusiasm for a locally owned company and a political career started to take shape in his over-active mind.



*Robert Ihrig, Insurance Agency Owner*

Once again, Bob called Lincoln Liberty Life with the proposal to open an insurance agency in Willmar. He realized the long term financial rewards of a successful agency would far outweigh what he was making by selling magazine subscriptions through students.

After serious, but not-too-lengthy consideration, Bob gave his two-week notice to *Look Magazine*. He leased an office space in downtown Willmar, across the street from a central bank in the Hedin building. It was a prestigious location. Office furniture arrived, and Bob hired a small staff. He made advertising decisions and completed a mountain of other tasks associated with opening a new business, all of which fell on his shoulders.

There was only one problem. Bob felt the pangs of another spell of rheumatic fever. After hosting the myriad events for Operation Snowflake and attending the National Convention of Jaycees, he began to feel even more debilitated and suffered from stinging nerves throughout his body. Overloaded on medication, he spent a solid week in bed recuperating.

After pushing himself day and night to get everything ready so the agency could open for business, Bob's heart balked. It went into convulsion with another deadly fever. The results were devastating. The next couple months saw all his grand plans spin into disaster.

Bob returned to the living room recliner. With little strength to talk with people, he could not work. It was the worst possible time to be self-employed. With no steady income, heavy debts and financial difficulties mounted. Everything he had worked quickly for unraveled just as

quickly. In desperation he sold the family cabin on Green Lake. No longer could he afford the ice fishing hut. Then, he lost the home on Ramblewood Avenue.

## **Home on Long Lake** *New London, Minnesota – Late Summer 1962*

Nothing held Bob down for very long. Having just filed bankruptcy, Bob secured a home on Long Lake near New London, Minnesota. The property had five acres of fenced-in pasture and a couple of Shetland ponies. There was an old wooden rowboat, an aluminum pontoon, and a little red barn with rabbit cages. Somehow, and with Bob's winning ways, he had found a seller with everything in place, and Maisy started raising rabbits again to bring in revenue.

Bob, the golden-tongued salesman, landed in this picturesque and peaceful setting, his very own "land of sky blue waters." No money down, bought on land contract, and not a word from Maisy. Ever the realist, she was relieved there was a place for her and the four kids to go.

With few options available, Bob accepted another on-the-road sales position with Daffin Corporation, selling farm, dairy, and poultry equipment, but he didn't like it one iota.

Nearly every day, Maisy sat on the dock and fished with Roger Royal by her side.

In the fall, the children rode the bus to school in New London, but only after Roger woke up Bobby Mark so they could fish a little before the bus arrived.

On weekends, Bob often hosted parties, inviting former friends. It was like staying at a resort, complete with fishing, horseback riding, baseball, water skiing, cooking, listening to ball games, making turtle soup, drinking, and dancing. Typical of family retreats in the 1960s, the beautiful and scenic home on Long Lake had their own master of ceremonies – Robert Carl Ihrig.

There was one year of peace and quiet living next to Long Lake for Maisy and the kids.

But nothing stayed the same for very long in Bob's life. Once he heard about a golf course for sale in Wisconsin, he focused on securing another plan.

Nobody could persuade him differently, not even Maisy, though she tried and tried.

## **Curtis Publications** *Sparta, Wisconsin – Early Summer 1963*

Laying plans to make the dream of owning a golf course a reality, Bob contacted Curtis Publications. They published the popular weekly magazine, *The Saturday Evening Post*. Curtis had a program similar to the Look School Plan, selling subscriptions through students. Given his successful experience with *Look Magazine*, Curtis Publications hired Bob. They let him pick where he wanted to live and Bob chose Sparta, Wisconsin, the town with a golf course for sale.



*Curtis Publication, publishers of the Saturday Evening Post*

Publically, Bob told everyone he was happy to be back on the road selling. But privately, in a phone conversation with Bud Warner, he admitted his goal was to make enough money to help fund his dream. He confessed to Bud that his desire to own a successful business had overpowered his logic and common sense to take it easy and rest. The hard work at Curtis Publications would be the means to an end. The job provided a stable income, while Bob organized the purchase of a private country club and golf course in Sparta.

## **406 Pearl Street**

### ***Sparta, Wisconsin – Early Summer 1963***

Bob traveled to Sparta, Wisconsin, where he rented an older three-story white framed home at 406 Pearl Street. The house had once been in a wealthier section of town, but the neighborhood had slipped into decline through the years. An inviting front porch wrapped around the left side of the house and extended to the back door.

In the foyer, an exquisite wooden staircase handcrafted out of tiger oak led to the second and third floors. The third level was an open room built as an attic dormer. A vast kitchen filled the back of the house with cabinets that extended up nine-foot walls. There was a walk-in pantry and a back stairway reached the second level used by servants in the early days to deliver food to the four large bedrooms. Next to the house was an old, rickety carriage house where horses were once kept and with living quarters on the upper level for the hired help.

## **Country Club and Golf Course**

### ***Sparta, Wisconsin – Mid Summer 1963***

Bob dug in with his mission clearly in mind. He drove himself to afford the payments on the Sparta private country club and golf course. He had pursued the purchase with vigor and bought the property on land contract. It looked like a super deal with little money down, but there were problems. The buildings were in desperate need of repair. The grounds and greens were overgrown with weeds. The membership was dwindling. But Bob saw past the negatives and concentrated solely on the positives and overriding potential. It would be ideal for him, the family, and the community, if he could just turn things around.

Bob coerced Maisy into cooking at the clubhouse. She grilled steaks, fried Rocky Mountain oysters, and prepared summer specialty salads. Every item was a testimony to her culinary skills. She loved to cook and had grown up making meals from scratch with all the

recipes inside her head, but she hated the pressure of cooking for the public. She was torn between her duties as a mother and homemaker and her new role of country club chef and kitchen manager. She didn't feel comfortable around the country club crowd and felt inferior.

While Bob was selling on the road, Maisy got up at 4:30 every morning to take care of the country club. She was upset that her husband had put the family into another volatile financial situation. Whiskey was the answer to her feelings of inferiority around club members and whiskey was the answer to dealing with the intensifying problems at home.

She felt her husband was trying to cram a lifetime into the six months the doctors had reluctantly promised. Her distress was that the six months had long ago expired. The crushing monthly obligation for the golf course was a constant source of stress for them both. Maisy was near physical exhaustion and a nervous breakdown. When fights broke out at home, she would lash out at Bob about his dreams and big ideas. She also feared for his health. Would all his doggedness be the inevitable end of a man who should have had the awareness to take life easy? Her concern was not vindictive; rather it was grounded in her deep love and concern for him.

## **PGA Bound**

### *Sparta, Wisconsin – Late Summer 1963*

Bob wanted to own a profitable country club. He saw the long-range benefits. At every opportunity, he practiced his golf game. Eventually, he had dreams of becoming a professional golfer. His sights were set on the PGA. He hoped his status as a pro-golfer would lead back to coaching. Until then, he was confident the exercise from golfing would strengthen his heart.

Bob was not disillusioned. He knew he was living on borrowed time. Each day was a gamble for him. He never knew when or if the torment would return. If it did, he knew it could cripple him. Yet he refused to live life scared. Instead, he ran through life, living it as fast as he

could, knowing he might not have much time left. He tried to make every day count. And truth be told – most of his days, when he was not laid up, did count for something.

Eventually, Bob did try out for the PGA tour. Even though he had only been playing the game of golf for a few short years, he did exceptionally well, missing the cut by a mere three shots. That encouraged him enormously to keep practicing. He believed with all his heart that the goal of playing professional golf was attainable and within his reach. For him, his dreams were finally taking shape and falling into place.

He just wished Maisy could see what he saw.

## **Green Bay Packers - Vince Lombardi Head Coach** *Sparta, Wisconsin – Fall 1963*

In 1963, the Packers held top billing in Sparta, Wisconsin. Bob adopted Vince Lombardi and the Green Bay Packers without abandoning his allegiance to the Twins and Vikings. He knew all about Lombardi and his success as one of the great coaches in the NFL.



*1963 Green Bay Packers – Vince Lombardi Head Coach*

On Sunday, Bob tried to rest. He'd lie on the couch in the living room and watch the Packers on T.V. or listen to their broadcast on the radio. With uninterrupted concentration on the game, he scolded anyone who made a mistake, regardless if it was an official, player, or coach. He cursed them all out as if he were the coach. Even Lombardi didn't escape Bob's rebuke.

The games helped take his mind off the chest pains that had returned.

Green Bay was one of the storied franchises of the NFL and Bob had studied their history. In the early twentieth century, Curly Lambeau worked for the Indian Packing Company. Along with the owner and president of the company, he started a local football team. Lambeau was a local legend, having played high school ball in Green Bay and then attending Notre Dame, where he played for the Fighting Irish and the folkloric Knute Rockne.

There is a deep richness to the tradition of Green Bay. When the Ihrigs lived in Wisconsin, the team was going for a third straight NFL title. Green Bay had previously won three championships in a row, during the 1929, 1930, and 1931 seasons. Could they do it again?

### **Possible Three-Peat** *Sparta, Wisconsin – Late Fall 1963*

It was an exciting NFL season in 1963, as the Packers fought all year long to take control of their division. An opening day loss to the despicable Bears – at home no less – gave Chicago a one-game lead they never relinquished. The Packers had a chance to move into a first place tie in week ten, but the Bears humiliated Green Bay again at Wrigley. Two losses in the same season, at the hands of the hated George Halas, were too much for most Packer fans to digest.

Chicago went on to win the 1963 NFL championship. Packer fans blamed Paul Hornung, the golden boy from Notre Dame. Had he not been suspended from the NFL for betting on football games, he would have more than likely led Green Bay to their third straight championship and a double three-peat. But it didn't happen, and Bob too, was disappointed.

### **President John F. Kennedy** *Sparta, Wisconsin – November 22, 1963*

By late fall, Bob was wearing down. It was Friday, November 22, and Bob was home lying on the couch resting and watching television. After a hectic week on the road, he was drained and cut the week short by taking Friday off. He knew he should have been out at the

country club helping Maisy, but he just couldn't muster the energy. Understandingly, his wife encouraged him to stay home. She knew he was not well.

As a Roman Catholic and strong John Kennedy supporter, Bob became a loyal Democrat. So when the news broke that an assassin had shot President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, it plunged him into a deep dark hole. He thought the President was doing a magnificent job, offering hope and opportunity for all, and now all was gone in one fateful day.

Students were let out of school early that day. The children found their father crying on the couch when they came home. It was a sorrowful day, and a world mourned.

## **Christmas of 1963**

### *McCook, Nebraska – Early Winter 1963*



*Front Row: Pammy Sue, Bobby Mark, Kimmy Louise, Roger Royal  
Back Row, Maisy (Dora Mae) Ihrig, Bob Ihrig, in front of Clara Miller's Tiny Trailer House*

As snow started falling in Sparta, Bob felt sickly and even more drained. He was losing weight and looking gaunt. But he had made a promise to his mother that the family would come home to McCook to celebrate Christmas with her. She had a larger trailer, which was more

comfortable than her other tiny trailer. Her home occupied the backyard of Joe and Izella Trimmer's house on West Third.

On Christmas Eve, Mrs. Trimmer and her son Francis brought over two large shoe boxes full of her fabulous Christmas sugar cookies. Her elaborately decorated cookies had become a holiday tradition, and the Trimmers were happy to see Bob and his family.

On Christmas day, Clara wanted to take a picture of the family. They stepped outside the trailer, and she snapped the photo. It would be the last photo taken of the Ihrig family together.

## **Clara's Christmas Gift** *McCook, Nebraska – Early Winter 1963*

Bob bought his mother what he thought was a special gift that year. He bought her a little Toy Manchester Terrier. As it turned out, she did not want a dog and refused it. She demanded that he take it back. She was angry that her son would buy a dog without her permission. Even her tears did not convince Bob to take the dog back.



*Clara Miller with Penny*

He told his mother that she needed a companion and thought a small dog would be an ideal pet she would grow to cherish. She finally named the little girl-dog, Penny. Bob was right; his mother grew to love that dog immensely. Eventually, she and Penny became the best of pals.

Bob knew his mother would need a friend to lean on. Maybe he had an inner inkling that he might not be around long-term to help her.

# The Beatles

## *Sparta, Wisconsin – February 9, 1964*

It was Sunday, February 9, 1964. The Beatles made their first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. The family watched the historic performance. Bob's opinion was not favorable: "They're not very good, and I hate their hair. It looks like they put mops on their heads."



*The Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show*

Bobby Mark was totally enthralled with The Beatles and loved their music and their hair. Bob preferred his own crew cut and made his sons wear a similar, shorter style.

Bob had no idea how Beatlemania had swept the country, especially among the younger generation. The appearance of The Beatles on *Ed Sullivan* broke all previous viewing records.

Being a teacher and coach and around young people most his life, Bob had collected a fair amount of modern records. They played them when he and Maisy hosted parties. He had always taken pleasure in a wide range of music. Besides the oldies with Glenn Miller, Bob liked Roy Orbison, The Shirelles, Frank Sinatra, Patti Page, Connie Francis, Brenda Lee, Sam Cooke, Nat King Cole, Louis Armstrong, and all the Bobbys: Bare, Darin, Lewis, Rydell, Vee, and Vinton. And all the Brothers: Everly, Isley, and Righteous. What was a party without Elvis? His stack of 45s sat next to the hi-fi stereo.

Why Bob rejected The Beatles left his children puzzled. They thought perhaps he was just growing old and had lost connection with the younger generation.

## **Dunk-the-Clunk** *Sparta, Wisconsin – Winter 1964*

Bob believed that to own a thriving local business, you must be involved in the community you plan to serve. He knew he needed the support of Sparta and the surrounding area if the golf course and country club were ever to become profitable. Sadly, the business had not turned a profit in quite some time and was still struggling.



*Bob Ihrig on the right with the V.F.W. Dunk-the-Clunk Fundraiser*

That's the reason he became involved in Sparta as much as time and his health would allow. He was active in the Knights of Columbus and the V.F.W., but even those commitments were starting to zap his energy.

The V.F.W. was an active group in Sparta; yearly, they held a fundraiser called "Dunk-the-Clunk." They parked a car on the ice at Perch Lake. People would buy a ticket to guess when the clunker would disappear through the ice. The exact time was the chance the ticket holder was betting on. The *Sparta Herald* supported the fundraiser, and Bob found himself featured in the local newspaper one more time.

## **Second Pilgrimage** *Otoe and Clatonia, Nebraska – Early Spring 1964*

With little planning, and no time or money, Bob decided to embark on a personal pilgrimage back to Nebraska.

Considering his present health condition, Maisy tried to persuade him not to travel so far alone. But he wanted to visit with some of his former players. He especially wanted to contact the boys from Otoe and Clatonia to see their faces and thank them for making those seasons some of the most enjoyable years of his life.

Not knowing if he'd ever have an opportunity to see the boys again, because of a doubtful future, he loaded himself into the Rambler and took off by himself.

Coaching had brought him immense joy, and now he yearned for the assurance that the way he had coached was all right with the boys. He'd apologize to the players if there was any damage he had done.

In Otoe, he visited Old Faithful. The building sat empty, abandoned, dusty, and lonely. He went into Victory Hall, now converted into an elementary school. He looked at the three trophies he helped put in the case. There were no new trophies, nor would there ever be.

In Clatonia, the school was still going strong. He stepped inside and visited with some of the old staff. He wandered over to the gymnasium to look at the gym with the unique tile floor one more time. In the trophy case sat four trophies he had helped add, but the 1957 – '58 Class D State Basketball Championship trophy captured his attention. His carried proud memories of that school.

He went into a few of the businesses that were still located downtown. Some of the owners were shocked to see him. They had questions, but he only had time to answer a few. He just wanted to know about the boys, where they were, and how they were doing. Most had already scattered. Some had finished college and were living a new life in new towns. Others left the small village because they could not find jobs. After wandering around Nebraska in his Rambler, he only saw a handful of players, which depressed him greatly at the journey's end.

## **Veterans Administration Hospital** *Tomah, Wisconsin – Mid Spring 1964*



*Veterans Administration Hospital Building in Tomah, Wisconsin*

On the return trip to Sparta from Nebraska, Bob was experiencing burning chest pain. He lay on couch for a few days, hoping the torment would subside. On Thursday, April 23, 1964, he was transported to the Veterans Administration Hospital in Tomah, Wisconsin, by ambulance. He was assigned a bed in intensive care, and after a week, they still had not told him anything. He knew well enough that something was wrong, and this was more than serious.

Fourteen hours a day, Maisy was working at the clubhouse, running herself ragged, trying to keep the doors open. Then she'd travel the eighteen miles to Tomah every night to see Bob. She was lucky to get to bed by midnight. She was exhausted and distraught.

Bob complained that nothing was being done concerning his health. Upset with Bob's nagging, one of the doctors flatly scolded him and told him that he could pack up and leave at any time. But if he did, it would be the end of his Veterans Administration privileges.

In mid-May, the doctors finally told him what they had decided. They would not and could not operate on his heart. Already, he had lost a tremendous amount of body weight. They said he was too weak for surgery. Nor could his heart withstand another operation. Neither could they move him, he wouldn't survive a trip. All they could do was hope and pray for another miracle. In other words, they had no practical solution for his medical condition.

Father Kenneth Carl, from Nebraska, made a memorable trip to see Bob and pray with him.

## **Clara and June's Visit** *Tomah, Wisconsin – Late Spring 1964*

At age fourteen, Pammy Sue took over the duties at home. She awakened her siblings and made sure they got ready for school. She did the cooking, laundry, and housework.

Summoning a fraction of energy, Bob wrote his mother and tried to be optimistic, but he was too worried. He told her that he would be in the hospital for a while and admitted to being so down in the dumps that all he wanted to do was cry. This hospitalization was unlike any of the other episodes, and he had begun to lose any hope.

He felt terrible that all the work had fallen on Maisy at the golf course. He was upset that he could not attend Kimmy's first communion. Every correspondence showed his growing despair. In one letter he wailed:

“Mom, why can't I lead just a normal life to help Maisy and the kids out? This was going to be such a good deal for the two of us this summer and now she has to do it all herself. Don't have any idea when I can get out of here, they can't get the right mixture for my heart medicine. I walk just a few steps and am completely tired out.”

Given the severity of Bob's condition, Clara and June traveled to Wisconsin to visit him. He had lost over 70 pounds and was growing more feeble by the day. The fever's torture to his body was by far the worst he had ever experienced. So great was the pain that he couldn't stand to have anything on his body, not a sheet, nor a hospital gown, and not even a Kleenex. He could only lay in bed naked, screaming and shivering in agony and dire pain.

Bob apologized to his mother and sister for being so down in the dumps. He could not understand how a God of Mercy would let anyone suffer like he was suffering.

Clara was heartbroken to see her son in such an appalling predicament. She had put him on a pedestal long ago and she never took him down. As she kissed Bob goodbye, she muttered her last words with intense despair, “That smile does not belong in a hospital bed.”

## **Clara’s Final Letter** *Tomah, Wisconsin – Late Spring 1964*

After his mother and sister left, Bob wrote a letter to his mother, knowing he had no strength for another one. He asked about his childhood.

Clara typed her final letter to a son she feared she’d never see alive again. She tried to be optimistic, but Clara realized the end was very near for a son she adored.

“Bob, you were born on a Sunday morning, just at dawn, Sept. 23, 1928. With your first lusty cry, the Dr. laughed and said, there’s nothing the matter with this young man. Of course he checked you more thoroughly but told me again that you were a fine healthy baby. You must have been too, as you were concerned only with eating when you were hungry, and then you seemed to enjoy sleeping and growing.

I think you were four years old when you were seriously ill. You had a high temperature and didn’t care to eat. We had the Dr. in three days straight but nothing developed to the place that he could tell what it was. By the fourth or fifth day the fever left and you soon was well. I don’t remember how long after that you started complaining of leg ache. In those days though it seemed that leg ache in children was often called just growing pains. I never felt any one would grow fast enough to cause pain and don’t know yet if there is such a thing, but used to wonder if it wasn’t due to the fact that children are so busy all the time they are awake, if it wasn’t running, or climbing, it would be riding tricycles, and later bicycles. How old were you when you rode your bicycle with Smolsy to go fishing?

When you were seven years old you told me one day you had a job. You had talked to your Uncles and made arrangements to be ready when they went past at five in the morning and you would deliver the milk from the truck to the houses. I disapproved but you told me you had told them you would so you would have to help them. I thought you might give it up after you had gotten up early a few mornings but you didn’t. However when school started, I wouldn’t let you work any longer as you had a mile to walk to school so I didn’t think the extra early morning exercise was necessary. During this time I recall the ‘growing pains’. A year or two later you got your next job. I wondered what I would hear when I asked you what it was. You calmly stated you had taken a paper route. I never knew exactly why you thought you had to work. But I couldn’t talk you out of it, so again you had responsibilities for such a small lad. First of all, we

lived one direction from town, and your route was the other direction which gave you too many blocks for such a little boy. Again I thought that was the reason for a leg ache. You kept at it for a few months until after some customers moved and left unpaid papers and others had you come back two or three times before paying, it was not only discouraging but also quite unprofitable so you let some other boy take it.

You always had to have something to do. One fall you worked after school during October and November selling boxes and boxes of Cloverine Salve. When I wanted to know why you were selling it, if there was something special you wanted, you said “No, I just wanted to get a doll for Junie for Christmas and I didn’t think you could buy one as pretty as the prize.” So you sold Cloverine to everyone we knew and I think a few that we didn’t know, but you did get the doll, and a more beautiful doll I have never seen. June thought so too when she got up Christmas morning and sure enough Santa had been there. Wasn’t there a beautiful doll to prove it? She was not quite 4.

Perhaps you remember what grade you were in when you decided you wanted to play in the band. Some of the youngsters owned their own instruments, and the school furnished some. However most of them had already been taken. A few were left. Which ones were left? The big bass drums and the bigger heavier tubas. I remember watching you come home that first night after school and band meeting. A pair of little legs trudging along, and that was about all that could be seen. The rest was all horn.

I was very concerned as I knew it was too heavy to carry a mile back and forth to school. You had already informed me that you would have to do a lot of practicing at home so you would catch up with those that had taken band before. I could hardly lift it, but you said it was because I didn’t know the right way to do it, but the band leader had shown you. I wished they had offered you a mouth harp to play. But you had your heart set on playing it, and your determination must have made the load lighter. Perhaps you enjoyed blasting it now and then on the way so your playmates would march along. You always had playmates.

Usually you had a bunch of smaller little boys with you as you wanted to be the one to show them how to play. I don’t know how many roads and bridges were built in our back yard. Little tracks, little hills were made, rivers crossed. All in a days work. You liked playmates and they liked you. Toys were few but were seldom missed as you had a vivid imagination. The games of “one old cat” were played with just as much enthusiasm as the Yanks of 1961.

Pets were always there too. They seemed to come from nowhere: a pair of deodorized skunks, a pet crow, a kitten, old Herkimer the rooster, always a dog. Your heart was broken when we had a beautiful Collie that was almost your shadow. One morning she was missing. We didn’t know the man that wanted her, but he never stopped again and later the dog came home with bruised feet. We assumed she had been picked up and when she got a chance, she disappeared again and never came back. Did the same man take her again? Anyway, chickens, pigeons, even a badger but when you brought home two brand new little baby billy goats I called a halt and made you take them back. “How can I take them back when the man gave them to me?” But you did as

I asked. I sure wasn't going to buy milk for billy goats who would probably eat our garden not to mention our shirts off the line.

When we moved to Wichita you seemed to grow listless and one morning you were just too tired to go to school. You had leg ache. I thought you were maybe getting the flu and I let you stay home to rest. You were content to read and rest. You were home a few days and although you didn't seem to get any worse, neither did you get any better. So I took you to Dr. Nix. After a thorough check up, he told us you had rheumatic fever. He assured us that although you would have to spend quite some time in bed, it would get better. And although you would not be a star in athletics, there was no reason why you couldn't feel good and lead a normal life, only you would have to learn to live with it and take it easy. I think you had made up your mind before we got home that you was going to get WELL and not spend too much time in bed.

The first few days you spent in bed, then I had to ask the Dr. if you could just walk out to the living room and lay on the couch so you could be around us. That was O.K. for a very few days, then I had to ask the Dr. if you could sit up at intervals. By the time two weeks were past, you had a work table built so you could work on model planes. A few minutes at a time and then when you are tired, rest awhile the Dr. said. But it seemed like you just didn't want to give in to laying down. You worked on planes and then when you were tired of that you would read. You spent about ten months that way. But you weren't idle. You read an average of three books a week. Also made 100 model planes. By that time you were feeling pretty good so you would go sit out on the porch. First about 15 minutes then a half hour, then twice a day. Then you started walking out to the walk, then a half block and so on until you were doing just pretty good. The Dr. said you could go to school if you didn't have to walk and if you wouldn't have to climb stairs and of course sports were clear out. You rode to school then with David (the little Jewish boy) and his father as his father went to work at that time. Soon you were walking home after school. Then the next summer we moved to McCook, when school was out. Before the summer was over, you got extremely listless again and used to sit in the shade and watch the others play.

I felt something was wrong so we went to Dr. Boulware. We told him your history and he checked you and said you had a murmur but he didn't think that was your trouble now. He checked your blood cells and said your blood cells were so broken it was no wonder you were listless. So he gave you something for your blood to which you responded very well and when school started you enrolled in your freshman year. You were to try and take or arrange classes with the least amount of stair climbing. I think you had that in mind that year but as time went on, you wanted so much to be like the others I don't think you ever mentioned it to the teachers the next year. Soon you were spending time at the Y.M.C.A. and you spent a lot of time working with the younger boys there. You were happy with what you were doing and getting better slowly but surely.

In your senior year you decided to enlist. I thought I couldn't take it. Then I remembered what Dr. Nix had told me 4 years before that although I was upset when I heard you had rheumatic fever, one thing I would not have to worry about which so many Mothers were at

that time, was that probably you would never be called into service. So I thought if you insisted on enlisting, I would let you as you probably would be back before the week was up, but it seems that you had gotten along so well they never even detected it. Although I didn't like to have you enlist, I was thankful that you were well again.

I have your letters Bob that you wrote from Japan. Will go through them and if you want to use them you can. I know at first all seemed to be well with you over there, then you wrote that you were in the hospital, and next that you would be home on a hospital ship. As soon as you were able to leave you came home and shortly after went to work, determined to go back to school. You didn't go just with the idea of doing just what had to be done, but always with a drive or determination to do a little more. Going to college full time and carrying a full time job on the side: or after you were teaching, also taking a night course, or coaching and then doing extra refereeing. Mom"

## **Regrets**

### ***Tomah, Wisconsin – Early Summer 1964***

Not every person has the opportunity to know when death is near. Some die quickly of a heart attack. Others die unexpectedly in an automobile accident, or in their sleep. As each day passed, Bob grew more powerless and helpless. In his final days, he knew more than likely he was not going to recover and that his life would end soon.

Like before, he could not raise his arms to feed himself. The only thing he had left was a mind that continued to race forward. He was still full of ideas and dreams. He thought about the golf course continually and wished he could be back out there. He knew his chances of recovery were decreasing by the hour because his body was not responding, which caused him to sink deeper and deeper into desperation and hopelessness.

Naturally, he looked back over his life and fondly remembered the players he coached. Certain ones brought him pride and a sense of accomplishment. He appreciated their dedication, talent, and trust. He relived the good times he had with boys like Royal Turner, Dick Dudden, Raymond Berges, Dick Clark, Bill Schuelke, Bud Herrmann, Keith Krahmer, Doug and Dave Peters, Roger Witt, Dick Steinhoff, Jerry Gorton, Rodney Sagehorn, Oren Miller, Ronnie Miller,

and so many others. Clatonia was his pinnacle, but he always felt Otoe should have won a State Championship – or perhaps even two.

Reflecting on how he had lived his life, he was filled with regrets. His fights with Maisy haunted him. She did not deserve to be treated the way he treated her. He realized he had spent more time with students and players than with his children. He wished he had done a better job of being a father. He could only remember one time playing catch with Bobby Mark. He'd miss his mother, and cried himself to sleep at night worrying about her. He loved his sister June, and understood he was not as understanding and kind to her as she had been to him. She had written letters every time he had been hospitalized.

His life would be a short one. Doctors had told him that all his life. He didn't do what he was told. He didn't stop smoking, rest, or take life easy. He now had time, all day and all night, to think about how he had acted and lashed out at those he loved. Life is not fair.

The weight fell off, and his muscles deteriorated. He recognized the stress coaching had taken on his body. He worried about his children and wondered what would happen to them. Finally, he began to look forward to the relief that would come with death.

With regret and remorse, in pain, Bob only saw his mistakes.

## **Bob and Maisy** *Tomah, Wisconsin – Mid June 1964*

Bob did what he wanted to do in life. He made all his own decisions. And in his last hours, he viewed his life as a failure. He didn't realize how many people loved and appreciated him, and would miss him greatly. Everyone makes mistakes. We all should have regrets, as nobody is perfect. None of us are without sin, and Bob was fully aware of his.

As he lay in pain, he realized he had married a good, faithful woman. Maisy followed her husband on his journeys, not hers. She would have been happy living on a small farm,

raising chickens, and having a horse to ride. Bob made the decisions, and she was expected to follow. And now, she needed to learn how to do things independently.

Till the end, Maisy stood by his side. In one of their last visits together, Bob told her he was sorry for how he treated her. He said, “Don’t worry; you’ll be married within a year.” It was not a jab but rather a compliment. He thought she was beautiful and that plenty of men would be willing to marry her and take care of her. He did love and care about her, just as she loved him. He was genuinely concerned for her future.

Realizing the end was near; Bob requested to have the sacrament of last rites performed once again by the Catholic chaplain. He was ready to meet his Maker.

## **Last Goodbyes** *Tomah, Wisconsin – Mid June 1964*

Hospitals have strict rules. Most are good rules, but some are not. One rule the Veterans Administration hospitals enforced was that no one under sixteen was allowed to go onto the floor and visit patients, not even if the patient was a parent. It’s a horrible rule!

When Bob was at the V.A. hospital in Minneapolis, none of his children were allowed to see their dad after he had open-heart surgery. Again, in the hospital at Tomah, it was the same. The nurses barred Bob’s children from seeing their father. Their infamous quote was always, “You’re too young to visit.”

By the middle of June, it was evident Bob would not get any better. Maisy finally convinced the hospital staff to let Pammy Sue and Bobby Mark visit their father. Pammy was fourteen and Bobby was twelve. Kimmy Louise and Roger Royal were still much too young.

When the two older children walked inside Bob’s room, they both gasped. He had lost so much weight that the children barely recognized him. His eyes were sunken. He looked like a skeleton with skin stretched over his bones. He smiled, but Bobby Mark burst out crying.

It was apparent why they let the children visit. This was their last goodbye. His heart was failing him, but there was still a big smile on his face. He was too weak to sit up but motioned for his son to come over to the side of the bed. Gallantly, he raised his shaking hand and pointed to Bobby's ear. Maisy noticed and caught his meaning. She whispered, "Bobby, bend down so you can hear your father. He can hardly talk."

Just for his son, he whispered, "Make the old coach proud."

It was the last time they saw him. He was gone the next day.

## Death Tomah, Wisconsin – June 19, 1964

Robert Carl Ihrig died on June 19, 1964. He was thirty-five years old.

Bob lived nearly four years after undergoing open-heart surgery, longer than any of the other early patients.

WISCONSIN STATE BOARD OF HEALTH CERTIFICATE OF DEATH			
Name of Deceased <b>Robert Carl Ihrig</b>		Date of Death <b>June 19 1964</b>	
Place of Birth <b>Tomah, Wisconsin</b>		Place of Death <b>Tomah, Wisconsin</b>	
Age at Death <b>35</b>		Sex <b>Male</b>	
Race <b>White</b>		Marital Status <b>Married</b>	
Cause of Death <b>Coronary heart disease</b>		Manner of Death <b>Natural</b>	
Immediate Cause <b>Myocardial infarction</b>		Intermediate Cause <b>Coronary atherosclerosis</b>	
Underlying Cause <b>Coronary atherosclerosis</b>		Contributing Cause <b>None</b>	
Medical History <b>None</b>		Hospital Name <b>St. Joseph's Hospital, Tomah, Wis.</b>	
Physician <b>Robert S. Merrill, M.D.</b>		Hospital Physician <b>Clare Christine Seall</b>	
Funeral Home <b>Wreath Funeral Home, Tomah, Wis.</b>		Burial Place <b>Memorial Park Cemetery, Tomah, Wis.</b>	
State of Wisconsin <b>WI</b>		County of Monroe <b>WI</b>	
I, <b>Betty Christensen, Deputy</b> , hereby certify that this is a true and correct copy of the death record of <b>Robert Carl Ihrig</b> as found in my office records.			
Witness my hand and seal at Tomah, Wisconsin this <b>2nd</b> day of <b>July</b> <b>1964</b> .			

*Death Certificate of Robert Carl Ihrig*

More than anything, Bob had wanted to coach. No one would let him play, so the next best thing was to become a coach. He always felt he could communicate, even though he was sometimes overbearing. He loved sports, the strategy, the commitment, and the rewards.

Ultimately, he knew coaching probably cost him some time on this earth as it affected his heart. He would probably make the same decisions if he had to do it all over again. Those years of competing, winning, and being recognized as somebody, he'd take that life and what he experienced over a boring life of rest and mediocrity.

Congestive heart failure and rheumatic heart disease were documented as the cause of death. An autopsy revealed the hole in his heart was the size of a quarter.

Finally, the golf course venture was a complete disaster. It was a sad ending to a gallant effort.

## **Funeral of Robert Carl Ihrig** *McCook, Nebraska – June 1964*

Numbness set in. Maisy moved what was left of the family back to Nebraska to be close to relatives. She called Mayflower, the moving company. The truck pulled up in front of the house in Sparta, packed boxes, and transported everything to McCook.

Bob's body was transported to McCook on the train. When the casket arrived at the Burlington Railroad depot, Dora Mae's father and brother, Verl and James Chitwood, and Bobby Mark went to retrieve it. They took it to Breland Funeral Home on Norris Avenue, a few blocks away.

The casket laid there until the funeral, which was held at St. Patrick's Catholic Church.



**ROBERT IHRIG**  
Born September 23, 1928  
Died June 19, 1964

**ROSARY**

St. Patrick's Catholic Church  
Sunday, June 21, 1964; 8:30 P. M.

**REQUIEM FUNERAL MASS**

St. Patrick's Catholic Church  
Monday, June 22, 1964; 10:00 A. M.

**OFFICIATING PRIEST**

Rev. Francis McCullough O.M.I.

**ESCORT**

J. D. Wood	Francis Trimmer
Robert Henton	Merle Confer
Rex Morell	Gere Kircher

**INTERMENT**

Calvary Cemetery  
American Legion Service

**BRELAND SERVICE**

Please use lights in procession.

*Funeral Program of Robert Carl Ihrig*

## **St. Patrick's Calvary Cemetery** *McCook, Nebraska – June 22, 1964*



*Tombstone of Robert Ihrig and Dora Mae*

Bob's three uncles, his father Carl's younger brothers, Irwin, Oscar, and Arthur Ihrig, from Goodland, Kansas, attended the funeral. Johnny Sagehorn and his family from Clatonia, Nebraska, did too. Clara Miller and her three sisters and brother and their families were there.

Many of the Chitwood and Willey relatives were there. Bud and June Warner and their children came, as did many of Bob's high school and college friends.

"Taps" was played by the American Legion at Calvary Cemetery where Bob was laid to rest.

Maisy was never the same. Bob had been her life, and she depended on him. Now that he was gone, she was lost. In a way, she, too, died the day her husband left this earth.

## **Maisy's Second Marriage** *Trenton, Nebraska – December, 1975*

Maisy struggled with sobriety for years after Bob passed. Finally, she went to AA – Alcoholics Anonymous. There, she met a man who had lost his wife. Together they found some measure of peace and happiness. On December 19, 1975, she married Harold Lawrence Tines. Eleven years after she lost Bob, she married again, not the one year he had predicted.

Harold was a good man and the caretaker of Swanson Lake near Trenton, Nebraska. Maisy was living next to a lake. She was cooking, gardening, fishing, and enjoying life once again. Then, on September 21, 1976, nine months after their marriage, Harold fell from a ladder, trying to fix an electrical wire. He died instantly.

The emotional scars from losing two husbands lasted the rest of Maisy's life. Sometimes, life just isn't fair. After losing Harold, she never gave up smoking or whiskey. Never did she ever talk about the years her first husband coached. To her, coaching took Bob's life.

The family buried Dora Mae next to Bob, where she belongs, in June of 2006. It was forty-two lonely years without him.

# Nebraska High School Hall of Fame

## *Lincoln, Nebraska – Summer 2007*



*Clatonia Cardinals, 2007, 50th Golden Anniversary Team*

In the spring of 2007, the Nebraska High School Hall of Fame notified the 1957 – '58 Clatonia Cardinals basketball team that they had been selected to be enshrined into the Hall of Fame later that summer as the 50<sup>th</sup> Golden Anniversary Team.

All of the players, except for one, attended the induction ceremony. Many people consider this the greatest Class D team ever to play basketball in Nebraska. The tag line that accompanied their honor speaks volumes:

The only undefeated team in the 1957-58 season, Clatonia went 27-0 to win Class D Championship while scoring 71.6 points and allowing 39.6 points per game during the season.

Harley Bergmeyer, the starting guard, admitted, “Coach Ihrig took us to the top. We all loved Coach Else, and he deserves a great deal of the credit because he is the one who taught us how to play the game of basketball. But it was Coach Ihrig who came in and knew what we needed. He is the one who took us to the top. I just wish he could have been with us to enjoy this honor because he too is now in the Hall of Fame, alongside all of us.”

In 2007, the boys were in their late sixties, and they relished that special season together one more time. They missed their coaches. Coach Else had passed just months before the induction ceremony; otherwise, he would have attended, too. Most of them had not seen Coach Ihrig since the last day of school and had no idea what had happened to him.

The players wished they could have had the opportunity to speak with him, to tell him how much they appreciated what he had done for them. Not one of them ever forgot him.

The camaraderie between the players lasted a lifetime. Most went on to successful careers, and what they accomplished fifty years earlier was a big reason why. Winning gave them a foundation for believing in themselves and that they could achieve whatever they put their mind to doing. It would take commitment, perseverance, and dedication. In the words of Napoleon Hill, “Whatever the mind of man can conceive and believe, he can achieve.”

Bob had promised the players that they would be champions forever if they won that last game against Red Willow. He also told them they were legends – and he was right. The Hall of Fame Induction, as the 50<sup>th</sup> Golden Anniversary team, validated and proved that the 1957-'58 Clatonia Cardinal basketball team will never be forgotten. They were exceptional, indeed.

In 1958, the Red Willow Zephyrs were inducted into the Hall of Fame as the 50<sup>th</sup> Golden Anniversary Team. They, too, will be champions and legends forever. The two teams are now side by side in Nebraska’s Hall of Fame and will forever be companions in glory.

## **Why?**

The question that has been asked many times is why was Coach Ihrig so focused on winning. He had been told all his life that he could not do what he wanted to do. He was a great athlete, but a weak heart prevented him from competing. He developed a heart to coach, and it was through coaching that he found self-validation – but only if he won. Bob had to prove he could win, even if he was not allowed to play. In his mind, he proved everyone wrong. He absolutely could make a difference, even with a weak heart.

## Epilogue

I am the son of the man with the heart to coach. I knew my father had been born with congenital heart disease. It was told to us children many times by our grandmother, Clara Miller. I knew his team at Clatonia had won a State Championship, but I knew little about the details. The Sagehorns had taken me to a couple of the home games so I could spend some time with their youngest son, Randy, who was my best friend. I had little understanding of my father's work; he was so busy that we didn't spend much time together.

What I saw at home with my father differed from what the public saw. I saw arguments and fights with my mother – not many – but enough to make for an uncomfortable home life. Consequently, I was angry with my father for the better part of my life. And I'm not the only child angry with their parents after realizing they aren't perfect.

During the years my father taught and coached, I was too young to note what he was doing all those hours he was away from home. Neither did I know that my father had been inducted into the Nebraska High School Hall of Fame with his team until Gene Steinmeyer organized a reunion and book signing in 2013.

After visiting with the players on that team and hearing what they had to say about my father, I went on a personal pilgrimage to learn more about my father and his career. Through his former students and players, I could see a side of my father that I didn't know existed. The more I interviewed people who knew him and delved into his notebooks, newspaper articles, photos, and other important documents, the more I understood what he accomplished and the struggles he faced throughout his lifetime. Congenital heart disease affected him every day of his life. He lived his time on earth at a considerable disadvantage and accomplish more than most.

Anyone who has lived through a heart attack, more often than not, emerges a different person with a new perspective on life. When you are so close to death that it's staring you right in the face, it's a frightful experience. My father lived with that frightful fear every day of his life. He knew that at any moment, due to the hole in his heart, his vital organ might stop working. Add in the multiple episodes of rheumatic fever, which damaged his heart even more every time he had the fever; he lived life knowing that his life could end suddenly, without any warning.

His heart was fragile, and it had been that way since birth. He went to bed every night, hoping to wake up the following day with a heart still ticking. When he did wake up, he had developed a lifestyle pattern to hit the day as hard as he could, knowing it could be his last day on earth. Yet he didn't use his diseased heart as an excuse. He didn't even want anyone to see that he had a damaged and defective heart inside his body.

Most people take life for granted. For Robert Carl Ihrig, his bad heart was on his mind continually. With what little time he felt he had, he spent it by trying to accomplish something worthwhile. He did want to leave a legacy of doing something honorable. In both cases, he did leave a legacy that most people would be proud to own.

I've realized that I have no right to judge my parents. Unless we have walked in someone else's shoes, we should be understanding and forgiving. Looking back over my lifetime, I've made my share of mistakes. Therefore, I cannot be the first to cast a stone.

Growing up, I was taught to honor my father and mother. In telling the story about my parents, I have tried to be fair and truthful with a dose of compassion. My Dad's last words have haunted me, and I hope I have made "the old coach proud."

Today, my father is the most impressive and vibrant man I've had the pleasure of knowing up close and personal. He was courageous. Was he wrong in running through life at 90

miles an hour? Probably, but at least he lived life the way he wanted and did it with what little time he was allotted.

None of Robert Carl Ihrig's grandchildren have had the opportunity to meet my father. I hope this book helps them realize they have a special Grandfather. He was a person that had a huge heart to coach because that's all he could do with the life he was given.

I will end with the words that Jon Gorton said about my father. Jon was in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades the two years my father coached at Otoe. He and his older brother Jerry snuck into the gymnasium almost nightly to play basketball. Jon worked so hard that he actually suited up and played with the varsity during his eighth-grade year. The day I interviewed him, he said, "If Coach Ihrig called me today and said, 'I need you,' I'd absolutely go. Whatever he wanted, I'd follow him and it would be one hell of a ride and it would be successful."

I know today, that I'd follow my father too – if only I had the chance.

Rest in peace, Dad, I'll see you someday on "the other side."

# **Coach Robert Carl Ihrig By the Numbers**

## **Football**

Venango*	4 wins	2 losses
Alvo	6 wins	3 losses
Yutan*	5 wins	5 losses
Otoe (fb no team)	0 wins	0 losses
Otoe (fb no team)	0 wins	0 losses
Clatonia*	6 wins	3 losses
Total	21 wins	13 losses

(A winning percentage of 61.76%)

(\* Coach Ihrig started the football program at these three schools)

## **Accomplishments Football, Baseball, and Track**

Cass County Football Champions – 1953  
Alvo Orioles #5 Final Ranking in State Football – 1953  
Took the Alvo Orioles football team to the Apple Bowl – 1953  
Dick Clark (Alvo) – All Conference Fullback – 1953  
Dick Clark (Alvo) – Honorable Mention All-State – 1953  
Jim Hermance (Alvo) – All Conference End – 1953  
Started the football program at Venango - 1952  
Started the football program at Yutan – 1954  
Started the football program at Clatonia – 1957  
Started the track program at Clatonia – 1958  
Helped start a football program at St. Francis, in Humphrey, Nebraska – 1959  
Coached the Jaycees Summer Baseball Team – Willmar, Minnesota – 1961

## Basketball

Venango	13 wins	7 losses
Alvo	13 wins	7 losses
Yutan	11 wins	9 losses
Otoe	24 wins	3 losses
Otoe	24 wins	2 losses
Clatonia	27 wins	0 losses
Total	112 wins	28 losses

(A winning percentage of 80.00%)  
(His last three seasons Coach Ihrig had a winning percentage of 93.75%)

## Accomplishments Basketball

Dave Peters (Yutan) – All Conference First Team – 1955  
Otoe Wildcats, Class D, played Omaha South, a Class A school, within 5 points – 19567  
Roger Will (Otoe) – Otoe All Tournament First Team – 1956  
Roger Witt (Otoe) – All Conference First Team – 1956  
Roger Witt (Otoe) – First Team All-State Selection (Class E) 1956  
Otoe Wildcats Won the Otoe County Basketball Tournament – 1957  
Roger Witt (Otoe) – Otoe County All Tournament First Team – 1957  
Dick Steinhoff (Otoe) – Otoe County All Tournament First Team – 1957  
Jerry Gorton (Otoe) – Otoe County All Tournament First Team – 1957  
Duane Hillman – (Otoe) Otoe County All Tournament Second Team – 1957  
Roger Witt (Otoe) – Two-Time First Team All-State Selection (Class D) – 1957  
Roger Witt (Otoe) – #2 All-Time in Points Scored in Nebraska High School Basketball – 1957  
Named to the List of Top Ten Coaches from Kearney State Teachers College – 1957  
Clatonia Cardinals, Class D, played Omaha South, a Class A school, and won – 1957  
Clatonia Cardinals Won MUDECAS Basketball Tournament – 1958  
Clatonia Cardinals Won the Gage County Basketball Tournament – 1958  
Rodney Sagehorn (Clatonia) – Gage County All-Star First Team – 1958  
Oren Miller (Clatonia) – Gage County All-Star First Team – 1958  
Rodney Sagehorn (Clatonia) – First Team All-State Selection (Class D) 1958

Took six teams to the district basketball tournament, advancing to the final game five times

Venango – 1953  
Alvo – 1954  
Otoe – 1956  
Otoe – 1957  
Clatonia – 1958

Won the district basketball tournament with four different teams

Venango – 1953  
Otoe – 1956  
Otoe – 1957  
Clatonia – 1958

Took four teams to the Regional Finals

Venango – 1953

Otoe – 1956

Otoe – 1957

Clatonia – 1958

Won the Regional Tournament with one team

Clatonia – 1958

Won the Nebraska Class D State Basketball Tournament – 1957/58

Claytonia Cardinals 63 (27 – 0) vs. Red Willow Zephyrs 47 (28 – 1) – 1957/58

1957-‘58 Clatonia Cardinals Inducted into the Nebraska High School Hall of Fame

Named the Golden Anniversary Team for 2007 – 2007

Never a Losing Season in Basketball or Football in six seasons of coaching

The Nebraska High School Hall of Fame requires seven years of coaching to be considered for induction into the Hall of Fame. If Bob Ihrig could have coached longer, he would have.

His congenital heart disease prevented any future years of coaching.

There are two players that were coached by Robert Carl Ihrig that should be considered for induction into the Hall of Fame. They are both worthy of the honor.

Roger Witt – Otoe Wildcats – (1955 – 1957)

Rodney Sagehorn – Clatonia Cardinals – (1957-1958)

## Back Cover



*1957 – '58 Clatonia Cardinals receiving the Class D State Championship Trophy  
Lincoln, Nebraska*

Author, Robert Mark Ihrig (Bobby Mark) was born at St. Catherine's Hospital in McCook, Nebraska, in 1951. He followed his father's dreams for the first twelve years of his life. After his father's passing, the family returned to McCook to be close to relatives.

Robert Mark turned to music, where he started performing professionally at the age of 13. He attended McCook Junior College on a music scholarship, heading the drum corps. At college, he met Susan Jean Butherus, also attending college on a music scholarship. They were married in 1971 and left McCook soon afterward to pursue their dreams.

In 2018, the author had his first book published, *Million Dollar Party: A Restaurant Memoir*, co-authored with his wife. In 2020, the couple returned to McCook to spend retirement years in a peaceful place they always considered home.