

Visiting Umatilla

By Pope Hamrick, Jr.

The first time I recalled Umatilla was during World War Two. I was staying with my Grandmother Sophia and Aunt Dodie in a small cottage on a street next to the Harry-Anna Crippled Children's Home. My aunt was teaching elementary school in town and "Granny," as we called her, kept house and cooked our meals. My home was in Tallahassee where I lived with my parents and sisters.

Back then, children visited with relatives for a month or so, to give their mother and father a breather and perhaps that is why I was there. Later when I was five, before the war ended, I began visiting Umatilla during the summers staying with my Aunt Beth and Uncle Paul Sparling and their sons, Dick and Joe. My Uncle James, was in the Navy and would come home on leave and I remember him well.



Dick, Uncle James and Joe

The Sparling house was located on Lakeside Avenue, up the street from Lake Umatilla. It sat near Mr. Ellis Moore, the school principal's residence and Mrs. Westervelt's two story house.



Aunt Beth and Uncle Paul's house on Lakeside Avenue

It was a beautiful lake in those days for fishing and swimming. A wooden dock sloped down to a beach and all the neighborhood kids spent many happy hours enjoying the cool waters on hot summer days.

I was required to nap in the afternoons, and once I woke to laughter from the lake and climbed out of my bedroom window over the flower box and ran down to enjoy the fun!



Me, age 5

Even at that age I knew the town was a paradise. Citrus groves surrounded every block of homes. In the season when fruits were ripe, the sweet smells of oranges were the delight of the town. The large grove behind Aunt Beth's house extended to Trowel Avenue and I loved to play in it, climbing in the trees to shake the fruit to the ground to take home.

Often, I walked to town up Lakeside Avenue passing the older Sparling's house belonging to my Uncle Paul's parents. An elegant, pink stucco residence, it was an appropriate house for the elder Mr. Sparling who served many terms as mayor of Umatilla.



Uncle Paul's parents' home on Lakeside Avenue

Next door was 56 Lakeside Avenue, the modest two -story house that my Grandfather Martin Hamrick purchased in 1924 when he moved his family to Umatilla, Florida from Villa Rica, Georgia.



Left to right - Beth, Paul, Esther, Pope, James and friend (sitting)

Across the road were the shuffleboard courts, always busy with players. Next was the city park, with its fountain and bandshell still standing. The concerts had long ceased, but frogs still played in the waters of the fountain and I usually stopped and amused myself in it before continuing my walk uptown.

The main street of the town, Central Avenue, was divided by the tracks of the Atlantic Coastline Railroad, which carried freight and passengers through the town to the depot.



Downtown Umatilla early 1950's

The train brought my mother, Esther Gay to Umatilla one night in 1926. Beginning a new life as an elementary teacher, her train was so late she was not met, and a stranger carried her luggage showing her the way to her boarding house on Trowell Avenue. My Mother was born in Monticello, Florida and attended Florida State College for Women, which later became Florida State University. She returned to teach in her hometown, but desirous of a new life and afraid she might end up an "old maid" obtained a job in Umatilla teaching second grade.



My Mother's elementary class in Umatilla 1927

Continuing my stroll across the tracks, I usually passed the Umatilla Hotel. At that time, the dining room was managed by Aunt Claudia. An Osborne, her father Charles was a prominent Lake County citizen and building contractor.



Charles Osborne's home on West Ocala Street

His widow at this time lived next door to the Umatilla Hotel, but I remembered the family home, the brick column mansion he built on West Ocala Street, which I visited as a small child and where my cousin Jeff was born. The buffet at the Hotel was popular and residents far and wide swarmed to the hotel on Sundays.

Continuing my walk uptown, I passed the Colonial Hotel, Tibbles Drug Store, and the Umatilla State Bank. My Father's sister Pearl, her husband Elwyn and daughter Tommie lived in this hotel for a short time and I would spend the night with them on occasion. On Saturdays, "an old timers" singing group entertained the town in front of the log cabin community building and Tommie and I would sit on the second-floor porch of the hotel and listen to the concerts. If I had money, I sometimes stopped at Tibbles for an ice-cream cone. My Father, Pope, worked there as a boy manning the soda fountain and also as a young man worked as a teller next door at the Umatilla State Bank. My Grandfather Martin's store was located next to the Umatilla Hotel and Diamond Street which later was the location of Turner's store. He established it in 1924 after moving from Villa Rica, Georgia to Umatilla. Crossing the railroad tracks, walking back to Aunt Beth's home, there was a small dime store and neighborhood grocery store. I once purchased a small saltshaker at the dime store as a gift for my mother, thinking the "S" on the shaker was the initial for Esther her name. Before returning to Lakeside, I usually walked by the gas station owned by J.D. Wingfield. My Mother went out with him when she first lived in Umatilla and he gave her rides around town on the back of his motorcycle.

Arriving in Umatilla Mother became friends with Aunt Beth, a teacher, who introduced her to her brother Pope who was to become her husband and my father. By now, the Florida Boom which brought prosperity to Central Florida was over and the deep Depression hit Lake County hard.

My father left Stetson where he was a student to help operate my grandfather's store after he suddenly died. it was a hard time for the Hamrick's after his death. My Grandmother Sophia, only in her fifties, "took to her bed" at times and never recovered although she lived to be ninety years old.



Gay and her son Ronnie, my dad and Granny

Aunt Pearl and Uncle James had recently graduated from Umatilla High School. while Beth and Dodie taught school in town. Grandfather's oldest daughter Lois, by his first wife, her husband Arthur Stricklen and five children also had moved to Umatilla with the rest of the family. The mortgage on the home on Lakeside could not be paid and it was reprocessed, the former owner, allowing the Hamrick's to rent it.

After my parents married, they made the best of their young lives. In the early thirties there was a movie theater on Umatilla Boulevard they enjoyed and often went dancing at the Old Eaton's Beach Casino in Weirsdale.



My Mother and Father soon after their marriage

They had to do this secretly as Baptists were not supposed to dance. The First Baptist Church on the corner of Orange Lane and Trowell Avenue was the place of main activity for my family in those early years. My Grandfather served as deacon and the Osborn family dedicated a stained-glass window in the church. I attended bible school there in the summers. The popular minister, Bill Norton and his family, lived in the brick parsonage next to the church and his daughter

Margaret Ann and my sister Janet were good friends. Uncle James was very active in this church and when I stayed with him and I was not allowed to play cards or go swimming on Sundays.

Swimming in the lakes of Umatilla when I was young was my greatest entertainment. I fished and swam in Lake Umatilla when the Sparlings lived up the street. My fishing consisted of sitting on the dock with a small cane pole trying to catch minnows with bread as bait. My swimming had to be supervised by my cousins Dick or Joe but as I got older and Joe could drive, he took Tommie and me to Lake Webster, next to the American Legion Hall to swim.



Janet, Gay, Joe, Tommie, and Me

Down the road, the old barracks for the army searchlight brigade still stood with memories of World War two. A special event was going to Juniper Springs on Easter, when all the family gathered for a family reunion. However, the lake I remember the most was the one in front of Uncle James' house on Ocala Street.



James Hamrick's house on West Ocala Street

My cousins Jeff, Charles, Walter and I would swim in the lake twice a day in the summer. We had to wait an hour after eating a meal, but when that time expired, we ran across the road, jumping off the dock, thrashed around, swimming to the high dive dock a little farther out in the lake and staying until we were tired and ready for a homemade popsicle and a nap.



Left to right - RobRob,
Charles, George, Jeff and
Walter

Often, I went to Daytona Beach and stayed with Uncle James and his family. Aunt Claudia's mother, Mrs. Osborn, rented a house every year on the ocean. It is possible I was invited to help babysit my cousin George, who was still a toddler. It was a thrill to go to the Daytona Beach boardwalk and swim in the waves of the Ocean. One summer Joe, Tommie, Charles and I walked to the Boardwalk, crowded into a booth and recorded a record to send home. In my early teens, I went with the Sparlings to stay a week in a cottage on Madeira Beach. We also visited my Grandmother Sophia's brother, John Perkerson. He was the superintendent of the St. Petersburg City Gas and Light Company. On that trip, Aunt Beth and I stayed in the cottage and I swam in the Gulf while Uncle Paul, Dick, and Joe went deep sea fishing with Uncle John.

I recall the summer in Umatilla I learned to drive. Uncle Paul purchased an old jeep and let Joe and me use it. Joe and I played a game with Bobby Merrill, Joe's friend, where at night we drove around Umatilla with me blindfolded in the back seat. When we stopped, I was supposed to guess where we were. Once we drove all the way to Lake Eustis, down near the old train station. When asked where we were, I declared we were in front of Tibbles Drug Store! Soon Joe began to let me drive the jeep in the groves and the scrub. There were a few dirt trails in these regions of Lake County and I soon learned to manipulate the brakes and steering wheel although I could barely see over the hood.

A few of the summers I stayed in Umatilla, my older sisters, Gay and Janet, were there. Both in high school, they worked in the Umatilla hotel dining room. Aunt Claudia the manager: cooked delicious food for the buffet that was served breakfast, lunch and dinner. The girls waited on tables and kept the dishes filled with food. Sometimes Ruth and Helen, Aunt Claudia's nieces would help. They all had to wake up at 5am to begin work; and many nights slept at Mrs. Osborn's house next to the hotel.

It was a busy time at the Sparlings house the summers I stayed there. Aunt Beth was still teaching in Umatilla and attended summer courses at universities nearby. Uncle Paul, a house

painter, left home early in the morning. Joe and I were left on our own and we thought up amusements to help pass the time. Occasionally, if the jeep was available, Joe would take Tommie and me to movies in Eustis or Mt. Dora, the theater in Umatilla having closed many years before. Other times Joe and I would make hand puppets and present puppet shows for neighbors. We hid behind cardboard curtains and manipulated the puppets-like socks on our hands. We made puppets suspended by strings and made-up stories that the puppets acted in. Once one of our puppets was a ghost and I sang the song "I ain't got no body." By the time Aunt Beth returned that evening from attending classes, we had not completed any of the chores she left us to do and she was a little annoyed. She soon recovered and sat down and play canasta with Tommie and me.

Pearl, a nurse; worked in Eustis after Uncle Elwin died. Dodie taught school in Umatilla along with Beth but later during the War was hired by the FBI and worked in Washington D.C. Once there, she met and married Uncle Bill. One summer, Pearl, Tommie, and I drove to Washington D.C. to visit. It was my first experience staying in an apartment building and riding on the old trolley cars which were still in existence at the time. The trip was during the cold war period and Tommie and I hid under the beds during practice air raids. Uncle Bill was a wonderful tour guide and we visited all the sites including the White House.

After Martin Hamrick died, Granny lived with each of her children for several years at a time. In her younger years she was considered a wonderful cook. Her children, with the exception of Uncle James, inherited her talents. I remember her reading the Atlanta Constitution every day as soon as it arrived. She was a descendent of the prominent Perkerson family in Georgia. Her Father, Thomas Jefferson Perkerson and his brother John Dempsey Perkerson fought in the American Civil War and married sisters. Their mother, Mary Polk, my great great Grandmother was second cousin to James K. Polk, the 11th president of the United States. The prominence did not end there, as Granny's Uncle John Dempsey Perkerson operated a successful corn meal factory in Austell, Georgia. He developed the first corn meal formula which was eventually sold to the Martha White Company in Tennessee.

While he did not cook, Uncle James had other talents. He loved to fish in all the lakes nearby. My Father and James were close and they tried, without success, to keep my grandfather's store open after he died. His and Claudia's house on Ocala Street was large and rambling. I loved to stay there when I was not at Aunt Beth's. It sat on the edge of a large orange grove which was harvested each season by pickers. He also taught his boys the proper way to pick the fruit, insisting that the oranges had to be twisted a certain way when pulling them from the tree. Each Christmas he shipped us a crate of oranges and grapefruit. The groves owned by my relatives added income to their daily jobs. I often heard Aunt Beth remark that she would buy some needed items once her grove money came in!

In those early years, a relative rode with me to Umatilla from Tallahassee on Greyhound bus. The summer of 1945, after I stayed at Aunt's Beth a month, my sister Gay arrived to take me back home. I was five years old.

As the bus arrived back in Tallahassee, we heard car horns tooting and saw people on the street waving to each other. Arriving at the station, our mother and father greeted us with smiles and told Gay and me that World War II had ended! By the time I was ten years old, I rode the bus to Umatilla by myself. Before interstates were built, it was a long trip. I usually changed buses either in Lake City or Ocala and my relatives met me in Eustis as Umatilla did not have a bus station. How much I looked forward to my stay each summer! I was never sure which relative I would reside with, and one summer I spent it with Pearl, Tommie, and Granny.

They lived in a small cottage behind Aunt Beth's house on Lakeside. While Granny spent some of the time in bed, she cooked most of our meals and kept house. Sometimes, Aunt Lois visited and Granny would dictate letters to her to send to her relatives in Georgia. While Aunt Lois was Granny's stepdaughter, they were close and she visited often. Occasionally Granny's nieces Blanche and Pauline from Villa Rica spent the summer in Umatilla and rented a small apartment in town. Occasionally, Granny wanted to go back home to Georgia to visit and either James or my Dad drove her to Dallas, Georgia near Villa Rica to visit her sister Elizabeth. Soon, Pearl after the death of Uncle Elwin, met and married a widower, Tom Wigelsworth. He was the Standard Oil distributor in Eustis. They lived a happy life and Pearl once told Tommie that now that she had a stepfather, she was assured her college tuition would be paid!

After spending twenty years in Washington D.C., Dodie retired from the FBI and she and Bill moved back to Umatilla. They lived on North Orange Avenue and Dodie learned to drive a car. Bill enjoyed spending time in the Umatilla library and his greatest joy was knowing the correct answers on Jeopardy. Beth retired from teaching and raised Dick's son Dwight sending him to Montverde Academy, perhaps using her grove money and money from his mother.

In 1928, my mother and Father married and moved to Leesburg where my sisters and I were born.



Pope, Esther and my oldest sister Gay

Our Umatilla relatives visited often. As the years passed, my family moved to Tallahassee, I became a teenager and my trips to Umatilla to stay in the summer were few. My cousins who lived there, grew up, married, and some moved away. My Aunt Claudia died, and Uncle James married his high school friend Lillian. Many of the citrus groves were destroyed by the hard freezes and insects. The packing houses closed. Nevertheless, Uncle James' four sons continued

to live in Umatilla, married, and had children. While some are gone, those remaining provide a link to the wonderful years I remember as a boy spending my summers in Umatilla, Florida and I will never forget them.