

March 2004

Below is a retyped copy of a letter from Charles Stanley (Stan) Gilliam to his children: Tony, Anndee, and Stuart Gilliam, originally dated January 11, 1977.

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Tony, Anndee, and Stuart:

Because Anndee expressed some interest in who her ancestors were, I thought I'd piece together the scraps of information I have before they disappear altogether. Actually, it's not a very interesting account, and if you're looking for something as glamorous as a witch, a pirate or even an ordinary horse thief, forget it. The closest thing to scandal was when your great-great grandfather, George E. Kuechler, while Sacramento County treasurer in 1884, was suspected of some odd bookkeeping while handling estates in his capacity as public executor. It probably wasn't true because he didn't leave an estate of much value. On the other hand his bad mathematical genes may have been passed on to you. During Prohibition, your great-grand-father, Arche Gilliam, was raided on a number of occasions by federal agents, but this was not considered much of a crime by the population in general. Even the agents praised the quality of his bootleg beer, sampling more of his than of any of his competitors' before pouring it down the drain. Be proud of that fact and always remember the advice he handed on to me on the off-chance I should go into the saloon business: "Always keep your coils clean."

As you know, my name is Charles Stanley Gilliam, and I was born April 29, 1924, in the Mater Misericordiae Hospital at 23rd and R streets in Sacramento. There's not much of interest in that fact except that almost 53 years later I go to work every morning a block away—and where I work is right on the spot where your great-grandfather, Arche, hitched up his horses 75 years ago to deliver beer for the Buffalo Brewing Co. He probably had to go to work about 5:30 a.m., too.

My mother is Flora Rippon Gilliam, who was born in Sacramento Nov. 29, 1898. She doesn't like anyone to know that, so pretend you don't. Because her family tree is shorter (not stunted—we just don't know that much about them), I'll start with them.

Her mother was Caroline Mary Kuechler Rippon, the daughter of two German immigrants who came to Sacramento probably in the 1850s. Her father, George Emil Kuechler, was a baker, remembered best for a fruit cake recipe anyone would be a fool to try today with prices what they are; a tremendous thirst, even before breakfast, for strong drink; and the fact he had his leg amputated on the dining room table. Since he died a couple of days later, they exhumed his leg and buried it along with the rest of him. This was one great-great grandfather who had it all together. He was, as I noted, a onetime Sacramento County treasurer. He also was a one-term treasurer, and I guess there's a lesson there someplace.

His wife, your great-great-grandmother, was Florentina Barbara Wagner, best known to us because her sister married John Breuner, the furniture man. He was very poor when he came to this country and lived with his baker brother-in-law. In gratitude, he allowed all his relatives to open charge accounts and gave his nephews, such as your great-great uncles, Frank and Albert, ~~menial~~ jobs such as running elevators and opening doors. In all honesty, I must say this was the sort of work for which they were best fitted.

Your great-grandmother, Caroline, always said her family were "low" Germans. Whether this meant that they lived close to the so-called "low" countries of Belgium and the Netherlands or whether this was strictly a character description, I never found out. They tended to be tubercular and so many of them died young that poor Caroline lived out her youth dressed in mourning. They used to go to the slaughterhouse to drink blood as a cure for their condition but it did little good except to inflate the price of fresh blood. On the other hand, maybe that was the birth of the Sacramento Blood Bank.

Besides Frank, who was deaf and one of the world's great spongers, and Albert, who's wife had a voice like a hog-caller's with laryngitis, and who ate nothing but meat and potatoes and died of stomach trouble, I recall only my great uncle Emil. He lost a leg as his father did, but survived and was later buried apart from it. He did not have it all together. Neither did his wife, Lizzie, who was not all together herself. Their son, Elwood, was a bit on the odd side, too. He was engaged for several decades without marrying the girl. In his later years, he slept with his mother, using a safety pin to connect his nightshirt to her nightgown, thus preventing her from wandering at night. My best recollection is that he should have let her stray.

If you ever meet any Kuechlers, there're probably relatives, so don't judge them too harshly. The Breuners are kin, too, and they'll probably make you reopen your charge account every time you go into the store. We don't go there any more. I don't know about the Wagners except that you shouldn't flatter yourselves that you're the kinfolk of the composers, because you're not. They were a little crazy, too, so perhaps you're better off.

Now we get to the other side of your grandmother's family, the Rippons. Someone claimed that they were related to the Earl of Ripon. It may be true, but the English aristocracy being what it is, I'd think twice before advancing the claim. At any rate, your great-grandfather, George Joseph Rippon, a decent, loving Christian man who worked seven days a week in the railroad shops, came home in work clothes and had his neck shaved, changed into a stiff collar and ate dinner formally each night. Dinner, unfortunately, was not always the greatest—Caroline was strictly a fry cook and he had a queasy stomach.

He fell from an engine in the Southern Pacific roundhouse in 1923 and was killed. Caroline lived on into the 1950's a remarkable woman. She was given to smoking cigarettes with the lighted end in her mouth and drinking highballs in one gulp. She also had a vocabulary which could scorch like a bolt of lightning, was a devoted baseball fan,

never complained when I drank all of her brandy just before she was ready to make a fruit cake (yes, that same recipe) and, occasionally, when I was small, would put my shoes on the wrong feet. Well, it was partly my fault—I had a habit of crossing my legs.

To get back to the Rippons, George was the son of Mary Diviny Rippon and Samuel J. Rippon. She was Irish, he English. I don't know where they met, but he worked for the Central Pacific Railroad in the 1850s and so did all of his sons, George, Jim, Will and Charlie. His daughter, Blanche, also married a railroad man, Tom O'Connell, and it is her fault that I can't tell you about that side of the family. Your great-great Aunt Blanche, sensitive about her age like your grandmother, tore the marriage-death page from the family Bible, thus effectively demolishing the Rippon Bureau of Vital Statistics.

Charlie married into money—the Runyon family from Walnut Grove—gave up the shops, became exalted ruler of the Sacramento Elks Lodge and devoted the rest of his life to drinking. He was beyond doubt the handsomest one of the family. The fact that I look like him has nothing to do with the last statement. His brother, Jim, worked all of his life in the railroad shops, and was the most methodical man I ever knew. When he had to retire, it threw his schedule off so much that he died within the year. His wife was a Croatian dressmaker and the most bowlegged woman who ever lived. Will was a saintly man but it did not rub off on his children.

So much for your grandmother's side of the family.

Your grandfather, Charles Bilby (no, that is not Billy despite his grammar school and high school certificates) Gilliam was born February 2, 1899. I know that this makes him younger than your grandmother, but don't bring that up, either. It does seem to be a family trait on both sides, however: Caroline was older than George, Flora older than Charles, Joan older than Stanley (well, two days, anyway) Ann Jonen older than Joe, Anndee Banks older than Tim. Ah, those crazy genes! (*Typist note 2004: Stuart's wife, Rhonda is also older than he.*)

Charles' parents were Maud Bilby Gilliam and Arche (note, that is not Archibald or Archie but just plain Arche) Gilliam. My grandfather was a lovable man but one mean bastard when he drank. His meanness under alcohol was the reason my grandmother gave birth to a still-born girl and left your grandfather as an only child; it also cost my grandmother a kidney (he threw her down the steps in a fit of jealousy) and may have led to the arthritis which made her last 20 years hell on earth. Always remember the saying, "Joy in the street, sorrow in the home." That was your great-grandfather—and I loved him very much.

My great-grandmother was Aceneth ("Aunt Ace") Stephenson Gilliam. She, like her husband, Thomas, came to California from Chillecothe County, Mo., sometime in the 1850's and settled around Sacramento. The Rippons and Kuechlers were tradesmen and skilled workers; my father's side of the family were farmers.

Anyway, by Tom Gilliam, my great-grandmother had sons named Nate and Arche and daughters named Arzela (Bond), Susie (Buell) and Blanche (Miller). By her second husband, George Bailey, she had a son James. The only ones I knew were my grandfather, Uncle Nate and Jim Bailey, but there are kinfolk from the Bond, Buell and Miller lines all over the place—I guess. They weren't that close.

Arche, my grandfather, was a teamster for the Buffalo Brewery in the early days of the century, then went to saloon-keeping in Franklin which is where most of my father's family had settled. When the country went dry, he kept dispensing stuff, which led to some minor legal difficulties, and later he went back into the legitimate bar business. A very improvident man, he left a host of friends and a mountain of debts and money owed him when he suffered a stroke and died on Christmas Eve, 1936. My grandmother, Maud Bilby Gilliam, had lost her mother Julia Woodard Bilby, and father, Richard A. Bilby, during the month before. It was noteworthy that the hearse nearly blew off the road on the way to my grandfather's funeral and one of the pallbearers, a one-legged World War I veteran named Jim Fairbairn, slipped and nearly beat my grandfather into the grave. I'm not sure just why that is noteworthy, but at least it is interesting.

On my grandmother's side of the family—my Grandmother Maud, that is—I can trace them back quite a long way. Her parents were Dick Bilby and Julia Woodard (which may have been Woodward at one time).

My great-grandfather, Richard Bilby, was born in Buffalo, N.Y., in 1852, the son of John and Jane Anderson Bilby. Both parents were born in England and, according to a source, John was a lifelong Republican. That seems doubtful, since he was born in England. At any rate, the family came west, through the Isthmus of Panama, in 1857, settled in the Elk Grove-Franklin area and stayed there. Bilby Road still runs past their home place.

My great-grandfather was a remarkable man and an active one. He broke ribs riding bareback when he was in his 80s and had a bristly, wet mustache (I hated to kiss him) which he shaved off the day of his wife's funeral. He was like Samson—he died within two weeks. Every other word—noun, verb, adjective, adverb, interjection, even prepositions, was prefixed by Goddamn. I have a vivid recollections of watching my father, grandfather, great-grandfather and great-uncle all playing poker in the back room of Arche's saloon. What a four-generation picture that would have made for your family newspaper!

I wish I knew more about the Bilbys but I don't. For your information, the powder horn and shot horn in our family room belonged to Johnny Anderson, who was, I believe, Dick Bilby's first cousin.

My Grandmother Maud's side of the family goes back a long way in American history, and I'll try to straighten it out as best I can.

Her mother was Julia Woodard, who married Dick Bilby in 1877. Julia's mother, Elizabeth, was a Sampson, daughter of Henry Sampson. No one kept track of his wife's

name, but my great-great-grandmother (she died in 1929 and I remember her vividly—Anndee has her chinaware) was so proper I know she must have been legitimate. Her father, Henry, was an English cider-maker who emigrated in 1844 (when she was 5) to St. Louis, crossed the plains to Sacramento County in 1852 and died in 1863. Maybe the strain of the trip finally caught up with him.

She was married in 1856, when she was 17, to Abram (Abraham?) Woodard (Woodward?), and this may be the most interesting branch of the family. He was born in Hoosick, Rennsalaer County, N.Y., in 1822, the son of Phineas and Phebe (Phoebe?) Phillips Woodard. His grandfathers, which make them about five-times great as far as you're concerned, were John Phillips, an English Quaker who settled in Grafton, N.Y., and Jonathon Woodard, born in Dutchess County, N.Y., of German descent and a soldier in the Revolutionary War.

Jonathon had fought, I guess during the French and Indian Wars, under Gen. Burgoyne when his 500 English troops and 100 Indians destroyed stores collected at Bennington, Vt., and later served under Gen. Stark. On the Bennington raid, he got lost (I have trouble with directions, too—see what heredity can mean) and missed the battle. That is why his poor wife couldn't find his body on the battlefield. He was still looking for the place. During the Revolutionary War he fought under Gen. Gates at the battle of Stillwater and was present at the surrender of his old commander, Burgoyne.

Your Great-great-great-great-great-Grandfather Phillips, on the other hand, remained loyal to King George III. He was headed for Canada when he was captured and imprisoned. He stayed in prison until the end of the war, too, but it was his own fault. Washington (George, that is) came to inspect the prisoners and granted them all amnesty—all except that stubborn fellow who refused to take off his cap. Maybe it was cold; whatever, he stayed in his cell while the other Tories went free.

His daughter, Phebe, lived until 1870, and died at 86 (she even took a trip to Wisconsin and back alone at age 80, and in 1864 travel was not too comfortable). Phineas Woodard died in New York State in 1867 at age 84, which probably loused up the actuarial tables of the day.

Their son, Abram, your great-great-great grandfather, lived on his father's New York farm until 1849, when he went to Wisconsin (I don't know why—maybe he liked butter) and to California in 1850. He was a wagon master, captain of a party of three wagons (well, they were big wagons) and 85 horses or so, presumably with a man riding each, and they ^(it) from St. Joseph to Diamond Springs, Calif., in 85 days. He mined there for three years while his partner traded in livestock.

In 1853 he traveled by boat through the Isthmus of Panama and back to New York in 23 days. This man was a glutton for punishment—it was back to Wisconsin and then, in 1854, he headed a party which drove 426 head of cattle and 22 horses across the plains again.

That was it. The 34-year-old Abram and the 16 year old Elizabeth married in 1856 and settled down in Franklin. They had a daughter, Julia, who married Dick Bilby and who was my great-grandmother, and another daughter, Flora (the damndest character I ever met) and a son, Irwin.

Flora was engaged to a man named Frank Caples for about 50 years (Dick Bilby said it was a contract marriage and the contract expired) and Irwin had one son, Abe. Abe was a Fish and Game man, and what I remember most about him is his penchant for talking loudly during funerals. Eulogies are usually bad, so maybe he did us all a favor.

My great-grandmother, Julia, who was married to Dick Bilby, was a very dear woman, but she had a little difficulty when I was small—she always wanted to hold me on her lap, and I was willing enough, but she didn't have any lap. We both were frustrated.

Julia and Dick had two daughters, Maud, my grandmother, and Luisa (Aunt Lula, who always gave you kids presents at Christmas). Aunt Lula and her husband, Harry Hack, had two daughters, Geneva (Karamanos) and Cecil (Stoecker). Aside from a still-born girl, Maud and Arche had only Charles.

I guess I should have mentioned that, on my mother's side, she had a brother along with your Great-aunt Georgie. Harry died of lead poisoning following a high school fraternity initiation in 1916, and Georgie had no children. That is why I have no first cousins.

If there are any lessons to be learned from all of the foregoing, I guess I could sum them up this way: The family trend seems to be toward long lives, wet mustaches and small laps; a sense of direction is occasionally missing; mathematical ability can be minuscule; and thirst for strong drink can be out of all proportion to capacity. So be forewarned and act with appropriate caution when making funeral arrangements prematurely, kissing, sitting, traveling, adding and drinking. Especially the latter.

I'll let your mother do the honors for the Jonens and Mechaleys. Meanwhile, keep this in a safe place. If you think I'll ever do it again, you're crazy.

Love,

Dad

P. S. Because I don't want you ever to forget her, I'll add this postscript about Mamie Petrovich. Mamie's father, Thomas Diviny, was the brother of your great-grandmother, Mary Diviny Rippon. (Mamie's real name was Mary, so she probably was named for her aunt, Mary Diviny Rippon.) Thus, Mamie was your great-grandfather George Rippon's first cousin. I'll let you take it from there.