



LAURENCE VIRGIL PAINTER 1923-1986

Born 17 March 1923 in Farr West, Utah, Laurence Virgil Painter (Virgil) was the sixth child of James Francis (Frank) and Leone Caldwell Painter. Virgil had three older brothers: Leslie, the oldest, was then 8 years old, John (Jack), Drew, and an older sister, Cleo. Another sister had died at birth. Subsequently two more brothers, Darrell and Clarence, and a sister, Belva, were born.

The family lived on a sixty acre farm in a frame house with a kitchen, parlor and two bedrooms. When the weather permitted, the children slept on a screened porch that ran half way across the back of the house. A closet connected the two bedrooms. When very young, Virgil often had nightmares. He recalled that he would crawl through the closet into his parents' bedroom and climb into bed with them. Instead of being angry, his dad would let him sleep cradled on his chest until morning. Virgil often said, "I wonder how Dad ever slept or how he got up early the next morning to do his farm chores. He never did complain about my doing it."

Virgil's paternal grandfather, Seth Painter, settled in Farr West in the early 1850's. He had joined the LDS Church in Wales. When he was 17 years old, Seth immigrated to Utah along with his father and step mother, and later married Susan Calpernia Pritchett from Virginia. They raised ten children in Farr West. Their son, Frank, bought a nearby farm after he married.

As a young man, Frank herded sheep in Idaho for his brother, Jack. One evening a friend invited Frank to have dinner with his family. There, Frank met Leone Caldwell, the oldest of seventeen children. Leone was a lovely young woman with a fair complexion, and dark brown hair and eyes. Her ancestors had also emigrated from Wales. After marrying, Leone and Frank worked hard to provide for their family and to make a go of their farm, especially during the Depression. Leone had a stroke when she was fifty three years old and died a few months later. Belva, Virgil's youngest sister, was twelve.

From the time that he was five years old, Virgil worked on the farm leading the derrick horse as it lifted hay from the wagon to the barn loft. Each morning before school, Virgil and his brothers fed the horses, chickens, and pigs, and fed and milked the cows. In the spring, they plowed and cultivated the fields using horse drawn machinery, planted the crops, mended the fences, and cleared the ditch banks. In the summer, Virgil helped thin and weed sugar beets, cut, load and haul peas to the local vinery, and irrigate the fields. In the fall, they picked tomatoes and hauled them to the cannery, cut and ground corn for silage, dug and topped beets with a machete, and then hauled them to the beet dump for shipment to the refinery. The girls helped their mother with the gardening, cooking, laundry, and cleaning.

The children also enjoyed playing games, especially with their many Painter, Pritchett, Carver, McEntire, and Caldwell cousins. Whenever Leone's sister, Ruth Sutton, and her family came to visit, everyone brought out their bags of marbles. Ruth's husband, Ralph, drew a large circle in the dirt and heated games ensued with boys and dads pitting their favorite shooters against their

opponents. They played tag, hide and seek, and kick the can in the evenings, and liked to race and wrestle. Sometimes, Virgil said, the games turned rough, especially on Saturdays when their mother and dad were in town. They picnicked, rode horses, and hiked. As they grew older, they played Church softball and basketball. The children had a brown and white pony, named Babe that was a favorite. They rode him everywhere, including to the Farr West Church House about two and a half miles away. Once there, the rider dismounted, the pony was turned loose, and it raced home on its own.

Virgil inherited his mother's dark, curly hair, hazel eyes, and dark lashes. His childhood photos show an attractive boy with freckles. He was named after one of his mother's favorite brothers, Laurence Caldwell, who often came to visit the family in Farr West. Laurence later became a Vice President of Standard Oil Co., in Salt Lake City. His wife, Ermil, liked to comb Virgil's thick hair. She would pay Virgil a nickel each time he let her comb his hair.

The Farr West Elementary School was a yellow brick building across the street from the old LDS Church House. During first grade, Virgil had a series of childhood illnesses and missed a lot of school. Concerned, Leone asked that Virgil repeat first grade. He was a bright, active child, who liked to be outdoors rather than sitting in a classroom. Like most farmers, Frank could not afford to hire help during the Depression, so each year Virgil missed school to help his dad with the spring planting and the fall harvest. Virgil, his dad and brothers also spent much of the summer in the hills and mountains or at Promontory Point tending their sheep.

Virgil was very comfortable with the outdoors, but once when he was about eleven years old, Frank left Virgil and his cousin, Charles Carver, alone at a sheep camp near Lost Creek while he went to check on some sheep in a different location. Virgil said they began telling each other stories about bears and other wild animals, scaring each other so badly that they climbed a tree and stayed there for many hours until Frank returned to camp.

Leone encouraged Frank to sell the sheep, even if it strained their finances. Cleo and the boys were growing older and Frank was often gone. Frank finally agreed that he should sell the sheep and focus on farming, but that proved difficult. A severe drought afflicted the Front Range through the early to mid-1930's. In addition, farm prices were very low. Farmers had no cash to buy seed, to meet mortgage payments, or to buy basic necessities.

To make matters worse, one day while Frank and Leone were gone, a fire started in the closet between the bedrooms. Family stories conflict as to how the fire started, except that boys and matches seem to have been involved. The house burned to the ground. Virtually all of their possessions, pictures and records were lost. Eleanor, Virgil's future wife, said that she remembers the day the house burned. The flames were so high they could be seen where she lived miles away. Frank had begun digging a basement to build a new house, but with low crop prices and a mortgage to pay, he couldn't afford to continue working on the new house. The insurance was insufficient to help pay for a new house. During the next two to three years, Frank, Leone, Darrell, Clarence and Belva lived in the basement of their Aunt Bertha Murdoch's home, one of Frank's sisters. The older boys slept in the barn. Virgil slept in the back of an unused automobile through most of his junior high school years.

Virgil and Eleanor Painter met the summer following their sixth grade year. They had many friends in common and attended many of the same parties and activities at Weber High School. Virgil's brother, Drew, and his wife, Lois, were living in California. On impulse, a few months before their high school graduation, Virgil and a friend decided to hitch hike to California to visit them. As a result, Virgil did not graduate from high school, a decision that he regretted the rest of his life. He frequently talked about the importance of education and his desire to attend college someday. Upon returning home from California, Virgil and Eleanor started double dating with his best friend, Roland Brown, and Eleanor's cousin, Florence Crowther. On 1 May 1943, Virgil and Eleanor became engaged. Florence and Roland married, and the two couples remained good friends throughout their lives.

For the next seven months, Virgil worked on the farm and as a chauffeur at the Army Supply Depot. As a farmer, he was eligible for an exemption from active duty in World War II. Instead, in the fall of that year, Virgil entered the Navy. He was sent to boot camp in Farragut, Idaho, where he won the middle weight boxing championship. As soon as his basic training ended, Virgil came home on leave to marry Eleanor. On Valentine's Day, 14 February 1944, Virgil and Eleanor drove to Salt Lake City in one of the heaviest snowstorms on record to be sealed in the LDS Salt Lake Temple. For their wedding pictures, Virgil wore makeup to cover a cut over his eyebrow, which he had gotten in his final boxing match at Camp Farragut.

A week later, Virgil reported to the naval base at Bremerton, Washington where he was assigned to a newly inaugurated ship, the "USS Steamer Bay," an escort carrier. The ship was built to transport planes and troops to the Pacific front, but it was soon designated as a combat ship. The crew referred to their ship as a baby air craft carrier. For the next eighteen months, Virgil's ship served in the Pacific with the 5th and 7th fleets. Perhaps because life was so uncertain, Virgil got special permission while in Guam to meet up with his brother-in-law, Kenneth Crowther, and later, with Eleanor's cousin, Lorin Crowther, by rowing a small dingy between ships.

Crew members had two assignments: their combat stations and their daily service stations. Virgil was a gunner during combat. After the ship lost one of its barbers, Virgil was recruited as a barber, which changed the course of his life. He recalled with laughter the times when he was trimming someone's hair with electric clippers and the ship unexpectedly dipped and rolled. The marvelous thing about hair, he often said, is that it grows back in a week or two; luckily, the sailors had few pressing engagements while at sea.

After watching the kamikaze dive bombers attack at close range, Virgil did not want to risk being trapped far below deck if the ship was torpedoed so he opted to sleep on the deck each night, along with a lot of other sailors. The U.S.S. Steamer Bay participated in the battles for the Palau Islands, Lingayen Gulf, Leyte Bay in the Philippines, Iwo Jima and Okinawa, as well as operations against Japan. His letters to Eleanor were heavily censored and contained no news of their military engagements.

Eleanor continued living at the home of her parents and working at the Army Supply Depot while Virgil was at sea. When his ship was sent to San Diego to undergo repairs, he was given a 10 day leave. While Virgil was at home on leave, the Japanese surrendered. Eleanor returned to San Diego with him, expecting to be there for two months while Virgil's ship was in dry dock. It was being refitted to transport men home from the war zone. San Diego was beautiful, but the

flowers and humidity caused Virgil's asthma to flare up. He was sent to Balboa Hospital and then, with the war effort winding down, he was given a medical discharge in October, 1945. Being stateside when the war ended was a blessing. A glut ensued as the transfer of those in the Armed Forces reversed directions. Months passed before most men and women could return home.

Virgil liked farming and had always assumed that he would resume farming after the war, but he had been trained as a barber and decided to pursue it as a vocation. He and Eleanor moved to Salt Lake City, Utah, where Virgil attended barber school. They moved back to Ogden shortly before their first child, Trudy, was born on 20 May 1946. For several years, Virgil rented space in a number of beauty salons and worked as a self employed barber. He proved to be a very able businessman; however, and by the time he was twenty nine, he owned and operated the Superior Beauty School and several beauty salons. He sold his business in 1964, but later opened two more salons.

Eleanor and Virgil had six more children, LeAnn (1947), Larry (1950), Ava (1952), Kirt (1953), Frank (1956) and Lenore (1959). They enjoyed spending time with their family and friends, often camping, boating, golfing, and snow and water skiing. One of Virgil's core beliefs was that he could do anything he set his mind to; he believed the same of his children.

The first home Virgil and Eleanor bought was a small two room house on Wall Avenue. Two years later, they bought a house in Ogden on Orchard Avenue, and then built a house at 901 N. Harrisville Road, across the street from Eleanor's parents. When Virgil's father died in 1957, they bought the Painter farm in Farr West. Virgil never lost the desire to farm. For a couple of years, Virgil tried to farm and to run his beauty business. Managing the farm, the beauty school and salons, and raising seven children, however, proved to be too demanding. When Eleanor's father died, they sold the farm and returned to Harrisville. They bought five acres from Eleanor's mother, Ellen, and built a house next door to her. Years later when Ellen was no longer able to live alone, she lived with them.

Throughout his life, Virgil enjoyed and excelled at athletics. A 1944 article in the Farr West newspaper stated that Virgil was known as "a talented and enthusiastic athlete." As a boy, he liked to swim, hunt, camp, and ride his pony bareback, often while standing and holding the reins. While at Weber High School, the football coach asked him to come out for the team. He regretted having to decline, but his dad needed his help on the farm. He had neither the time nor the money to play football. During the winter months, he did participate on the wrestling team. The Ogden Standard Examiner reported that he was a champion wrestler, as well as a champion boxer at Camp Farragut. After serving in the Navy, he liked to ski jump at Snow Basin. He took up golf, water skiing, and hunting with a bow and arrow, and continued to ride horses. He was partial to horses and dogs.

Virgil also liked people, especially children. He was playful and energetic, and a good storyteller who enjoyed laughing and joking with others. Having experienced severe economic hardships as a child, Virgil was sensitive to those in need. He worked hard to provide for his family, but could not stand to see any child without adequate shoes and clothes. He often helped strangers, at times removing his coat to give it away to someone in need. He trained many people in need of work how to cut hair, and helped a number of men and women get started in

the beauty business, giving them the opportunity to establish their own careers. When college students needed work, he hired them to clean or to do other jobs for him.

In June 1976, at the age of 53, Virgil had a stroke. In time, he was able to work some, but the nerves in his left hand and arm made the skin prickle painfully and were extremely sensitive. Three months after Virgil's stroke, Larry was killed in a car accident in Idaho. Virgil and Eleanor sustained another shock when Trudy died on New Year's Eve, 1977, after a short three day illness. Eleanor's mother, Ellen, who had been living with them for several years, died in April of 1978, at the age of 91. On New Year's Day, 1982, Virgil had another stroke that paralyzed his left side. Even after his stroke, Virgil wanted to be active and independent, which became increasingly more difficult.

At the time, Ava was an instructor at Painter's Beauty School, owned by Virgil's brother, Clarence. She quit to take over the remaining salon, to manage it for her mother and dad, even as she attended school and finished her MBA at Utah State University. Eleanor was Virgil's constant companion, helping him to be as active as possible, and trying to keep him out of harm's way. His mind was alert, and he continued to push himself to do more. Through sheer determination, he managed to ride his horses, but not without spills and injuries. They took long drives to visit family, or to look at farmland, which Virgil liked to do. Above all, Virgil loved to be with his children and grandchildren, and to hold the toddlers on his lap and entertain them. They loved him in return. He died on Christmas Eve, 1986. He is buried at the Aultorest Memorial Park in Ogden, Utah.

(Source: Family records and recollections of LeAnn Painter Wheeler and Eleanor C. Painter. Written by LeAnn Painter Wheeler, July 2012)

Painter, James Francis (Frank)

Caldwell, Leone

Painter, Leone Caldwell

Painter, Leslie

Painter, John (Jack)

Painter, Drew

Painter, Cleo

Painter, Darrell

Painter, Clarence

Painter Belva

Painter, Seth

Painter, Susan Calpernia Pritchett

Pritchett, Susan Calpernia

Sutton, Ruth

Sutton, Ralph

Caldwell, Laurence

Caldwell, Ermil

Carver, Charles

Murdoch, Bertha

Painter, Lois

Crowther, Eleanor

Painter, Eleanor Crowther

Brown, Florence Crowther

Crowther, Florence

USS Steamer Bay

Crowther, Lorin

Crowther, Kenneth

Superior Beauty School

Painter, LeAnn

Painter, Larry

Painter, Kirt

Painter, Ava

Painter, Frank

Painter, Lenore

Snow Basin

Painter's Beauty School

Crowther, Ellen

Babe (brown & white pony)

McEntire Cousins