

## Independent Freedom 2/28/16

On May 2, 1945, the Battle of Berlin was still raging. The Germans, defending their capital, were making a last stand, and the killing and destruction continued.

On May 6, Billy and his younger sister were sitting at the top of the wooden back stairs of the apartments where they lived in Oakland, California, enjoying a peanut butter and jelly sandwich they had made while their mother lay in bed sick.

Billy and Mary had joined their mother two months earlier. They were in foster care while their mother found a job on the east coast where her boyfriend was stationed in the Navy as a See Bee. After moving in with their mother, Billy entered the third grade and Mary in the second grade at Glenview Grammar School, a five-block hike from the apartment. The second day he was there, two fifth-grade boys approached him.

“Spell Mississippi,” one of them said, glaring at Billy.

Billy looked puzzled. “Huh?”

“Spell Mississippi,” said the other boy in a threatening tone.

“Ah...M-i-s-s-py.”

“Mississippi,” said one of the boys. “M-i-s-s-i-s-s-i-p-p-i. And you’d better learn it by tomorrow, do you understand?”

Billy got the message. Those boys were big. He didn’t remember the spelling. He asked around and nobody else seemed to know either, but he didn’t want to get beaten up. He asked his teacher, Miss Dart.

“How do you spell Mis-sipee.”

Miss Dart, a young teacher, looked puzzled for a moment, but she was there to teach.

“You mean the state Mississippi?”

“Yes, I think so.”

She walked to her desk and took out a small dictionary from the side drawer to show Billy the proper spelling. Look under M and here it is Mississippi. M-i-s-s-i-s-s-p-p-i.”

“If you get stuck on a word you are welcome to use my dictionary. She wrote Mississippi down on a piece of paper and handed it to Billy.

“Thank you,” said Billy.

That led later to Miss Dart giving lessons on the states and their proper spelling.

Billy studied the word all night until it was locked into his brain, never to be forgotten.

The next afternoon, the same two boys approached Billy.

“Spell Mississippi,” the shorter boy said.

“Yeah, you better get it right,” said the other boy with his fist clinched tight.

“M-I-S-S-I-S-S-I-P-P-I!” Billy shouted quickly.

“What?” said one of the boys.

“M-i-s-s-i-s-s-i-p-p-i.”

“That’s right,” said the shorter boy, surprised. They walked away without saying another word.

Billy felt proud of himself.

The following day, the boys approached Billy again.

“Do you think you can beat up Bobby Grottkau?” smirked the shorter boy in front of the grinning taller boy.

Bobby was in Billy’s third-grade class and was one of the biggest kids in the school.

“I don’t know.”

The shorter boy moved close to Billy almost touching faces with the other boy closely behind “We want you to fight him now, or we will beat you up.”

Bobby was a few yards away, kicking a ball around. Billy thought about it and figured he had a better chance at fighting Bobby than the two bullies. He walked up to Bobby.

“Do you want to fight?”

“Huh?” said Bobby. “What for?”

Bobby looked over at the two boys, then back at Billy. “Okay, sure.”

Both boys grabbed one another. Bobby pulled Billy to the ground and they wrestled on the pavement. Billy was on top of Bobby, trying to hold him down, but Bobby was too strong. He rolled Billy over and ended up on top. Billy attempted to break free, but he wasn’t going anywhere.

“Do you give up?” said Bobby.

Billy said nothing.

Bobby assumed he had won and stood up. Billy got onto his feet.

“Do you want to play kickball?” said Bobby.

“Sure.”

After that, they became good friends. Nobody messed with Billy again. (Years later,

Bobby became a pro football player.)

Miss Dart spent a month with the children for the school’s annual open house project, and encouraged the children to be creative. They built houses, stores, a church, and landscaping out of used cardboard. They painted everything and added decorations so that the project looked like a small town. Everyone in class was proud of the accomplishment.

The week before the open house, Miss Dart entered the classroom and found the project torn to shreds and destroyed. The window of the classroom was wedged open. When Billy came to class, Miss Dart was in tears. The kids had nothing to show for all the work they had done. It was decided that they would rebuild. Billy was enthusiastic, and told Bobby that they had been bombed by the Germans. Bobby said he would guard the project and defend it. The children spent additional hours after school to complete their task, joined by parents, relatives, the school principal, and friends. On the night of the open house, the children were still putting the finishing touches on their project, right up to the last minute. But it was worth it. They won first prize. Later, it was discovered that the party responsible for the project's destruction was not the Germans, but one of the students in Billy's class. Their punishment was two weeks' suspension and to work part of the summer cleaning the school grounds.

On May 7, 1945, Billy's mother Lois's fever increased. Unconscious, her dark-red hair was exposed above the covers in her tiny bed in the corner of the small living room of the one-bedroom apartment. She suffered from strep throat and the flu, which would keep her there for three days.

The other six apartments on the second floor of the building were rented by women, most of them with children. They all had husbands, boyfriends, or former husbands serving their country. Down at the front next to the stairs lived Brenda Bigbottom, a large woman who misquoted everything through hearsay. She still believed the world was flat, and that if you flew too high up in an airplane, you would crash into the ceiling of the sky. Later, after the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, she stuck out her thumb and said the bomb was no bigger than that, leaving an impression in Billy's mind for years to come. She lived with her mother, who

was never seen. Her husband hadn't written to her or come to see her for three years. He was in the Navy and found love in every port.

Across the hall from Billy lived Virginia, who lay in bed all day and partied at night. She had a son, who would proudly tell everyone he approached that his name was Mickey Michael Robert Heiberg, with the impression that he was going to give a salute to the Fuhrer. He was tall with blond hair and was bigger than Billy. They were both nine years old.

To the left of the Heiberg's lived Helen Woolsey, a muscular, short woman with bleached blond curly hair who worked at the Oakland shipyards as a welder. She had a five-year-old daughter named Sally, who was known as Little Iodine, a bundle of mischief. To the left of Woolsey lived Gertrude Stockmen, with her one-year-old boy who cried all night, but nobody heard him because the bar below was so noisy that his yelling was drowned out. She worked part-time at the drugstore down the street.

Across the hall from Gertrude Stockmen lived Nancy Anderson and her six-year-old son, Butch, who attended kindergarten. She slept half the day, recovering from partying the night before with her husband's monthly allotment, until it ran out. She bummed food from the rest of the women, and sometimes change from a serviceman who was visiting. Her husband was in the Pacific fighting the Japanese.

Between Billy and Nancy Anderson lived Trudy Wagner, a solid-built brunette who worked at the post office. Her husband was a chief petty officer on a ship that had participated in the landing of Omaha Beach in France on D-Day. He drove an amphibious troop carrier that had an elevated machine gun encased with armor and mounted on the back, which was operated by his partner. Wagner's troop carrier had been one of the first to hit the beach. All of the soldiers died as they departed in a foot of water. They were shot and blown to pieces, some in the boat,

some on the ramp before they hit the water. He was one of the few lucky drivers who made it back to the ship after the first wave. The few soldiers inside the carrier that were killed before departing onto the beach, including his Navy companion, were removed quickly and the blood-stained boat was sent back for a second round with a new Navy machine gunner. The next time he dropped off the troops farther out in three feet of water, quickly backing up before turning around to head back to the ship to avoid running over the dead and wounded bodies. Bullets scraped the boat. As he approached the vessel, the boat took in water and sank 30 yards from the ship, but he survived. His letters never mentioned D-Day; his thoughts were of being home with his family.

The women all supported one another and all their mail from overseas was shared, bringing home news from the war.

Helen Woolsey liked to party on weekends, along with some of the other mothers, with the servicemen who hung around the bar below. Little Iodine joined in and finished off what was left of the liquor in the glasses, which just made her wilder. She usually ended up in Billy's apartment, jumping around on the kids' bed in the middle of the night.

Billy was used to being independent when his mother wasn't around, but she was strong willed and ruled the family with a wooden clothes hanger. A single mother and divorced, she worked for Safeway, usually from noon to nine p.m. She was assistant manager and checker — a titled position only. Female grocery workers earned wages lower than what a man would make. Usually, the only person left at the store at that late hour, she would close down the store and walk home seven blocks in the dark, carrying bags of groceries, many of them discarded leftovers.

During the hours his mother was gone, Billy was responsible for his sister. Some of the ladies in the apartment looked in on occasion, but Billy was usually out, his sister following, challenging his little world around him. Billy liked to go down to Dimond Creek, one block behind the apartment, walking through a big, empty lot next to some storage buildings, occasionally with Mickey and Mary tagging along. Sometimes Little Iodine would try to follow, but the boys usually managed to ditch her. There was a large rope hanging from a tree limb and they would swing from one side of the creek to the other, always getting their shoes wet.

One day while their mother was at work, Billy put his and Mary's wet shoes in the oven to dry them out. That evening when his mother came home, she smelled something burning. Billy and Mary were in the bathroom brushing their teeth.

"What is that smell?" yelled Lois.

Before the kids could answer, she ran to the kitchen and found the children's shoes curled up and shrunk. She chased the kids around the apartment with a broken clothes hanger. They had no other shoes except what was left of their old shoes, which were worn out with holes in the soles. Those would have to do until his mother could afford the next pair, months later.

Nothing discouraged Billy from going down to the creek and swinging on the rope, with friends or other boys passing by.

One day the boys took a hike across the creek, up the bank, and ten yards across a flat grassy area where they discovered big trees full of wild plums. Billy, Mickey, Mary, and a friend thought they had found a treasure. They picked and ate some plums they could reach. Billy climbed a tree and threw plums at the kids. A plum fight began. Mary started crying when a plum hit her on the side of the face. Mickey kept picking plums and putting them in his pockets, while Billy, pulling up his shirt like a basket, loaded up. The other boys followed suit. Mary,

feeling better after stuffing more fruit into her mouth, pulled up her dress and filled it with the ripe fruit.

“I can’t hold anymore,” said Billy.

“Me either,” said Mickey, picking a few more before following Billy down the bank to the creek. Mary stumbled and lost half of her plums when they rolled down the bank, some into the creek. Billy headed across the water with Mickey following, feeling pain from the water, sand, and gravel oozing in through the holes in his old shoes and worn-out socks.

“Wait!” said Mary, screaming, trying to pick up what she had lost.

“We’re not waiting!” yelled Billy. “These plums are heavy.”

“You’d better hurry,” said Mickey, splashing through the water.

Mary watched half of her plums roll down the bank and float down the creek. Dragging herself and the rest of the damaged plums, she stumbled across the water, losing a few more after hitting the bank and falling into the mud.

Back at the apartment, at the top of the stairs, Billy and Mickey looked back and saw Mary struggling to keep up.

“Hurry!” yelled Billy.

Mary entered, puffing, her bottom half and knees covered in mud, and her top half covered with sticky plum juice.

“You’d better clean up,” said Billy.

“I’m tired.”

“You’d better clean up before someone tells Mom. And don’t let Mom see that dirty dress.”



Billy didn't stick the wet shoes into the oven this time. Instead, he and Mary wiped down the holey shoes and cleaned the mud off using their mother's bath towel.

"Who made this mess?" yelled their mother when she entered the tiny kitchen after a long day at work.

The kids were sleeping...or pretending.

"It's time to get up for school," their mother yelled angrily. "Where did you get all this messy fruit. And who ruined my bath towel?"

"Huh?" Billy said, wiping his eyes.

"Get up both of you, now!"

"We picked them for you," said Billy, not quite awake, proud of providing some food but unsure of what he had accomplished by the tone of his mother's voice.

"You left a mess and I had to clean it up."

"We brought home some fresh plums to eat."

"Damn you kids, I work my butt off to feed you and you left a mess."

Mary kept quiet, as usual. Billy said nothing while his mother carried on with her threatening tone. They both hurriedly ate their breakfast and scrambled out of the apartment early, to escape their mother's anger, not understanding why she was so mad.

The Dimond District was three blocks long with a one-block side street. It had all the businesses and institutions needed to serve the community. Across the street, facing the side of the apartment, was a tire shop. Next to that, intruding onto the sidewalk, stood what looked like an outhouse (crapper) with a name painted in red above the opening that read *Casper's Hot Dogs*. Almost daily, the upper front of it popped open and steam would roll out, exposing a stainless container full of foot-long hot dogs. They were served on a long bun with tomatoes,

mustard, pickles, and onions. Billy, and especially Mary, always had their eyes on that shack. Billy could smell the fragrance coming from the shack, and on occasion would slip away from Mary and purchase a dog for 15 cents. It took two hands to hold the juicy, steaming hot dog and Billy enjoyed every bite, juice from the toppings oozing down his chin onto his shirt, later licking it off for the final bite.

Billy made money by selling whiskey to mostly drunk servicemen. In the back behind the bar and upstairs apartments, piles of empty whiskey bottles were stacked. He would pour a few drops left from the bottles until he had a full one of different types of liquor, including beer, and would then sell it for fifty cents to a drunken sailor or soldier. Business was good, especially on the weekends. One day, Billy got so intent on filling a bottle that he tripped and cut his leg just below his left knee on a broken bottle. Mary, as usual, was watching, thinking about the Casper's hot dog that Billy had promised when he sold the whiskey. He was rushed to the local doctor's office two blocks away by one of the women in the apartment, and received seven stitches. His mother had to take off from work, and showed up in time to pay the bill, pleading to make four payments, thereby extending the purchase of new shoes for a few more months.

On occasion, when their mother worked late, they ate an early dinner at the top of the hill at Joe's Burgers, paid for with the few cents their mother had left them for a hamburger and milkshake. Mary would tag along behind Billy, struggling to keep up with him. That milkshake meant everything to her; she was always the first to finish her Joe's meal. Other days, when their mother worked late, they ate dinner with the Heibergs. Both children were well fed, no extra, but just enough to keep them healthy. They never fought over the food. Billy would eat the meat and Mary liked the fat.

The whole nation was listening to the radio daily. The war was coming to an end, and on May 8, 1945, V-Day was announced. The war was over. The Germans had officially surrendered.

Mrs. Wagner sounded the alarm, yelling down the hallway. "The war is over, the war is over! The men are coming home!"

Mrs. Woolsey heard the news about the same time and ran out the door with Little Iodine following. The two women grabbed one another, hugging, dancing, and screaming, "The war is over, the war is over!" Little Iodine was pulling on Mrs. Wagner's dress, almost ripping it off as she tried to be a part of whatever it was.

With all the noise, more apartment doors flew open. Mrs. Anderson, still in bed at four o'clock, woke up from her afternoon sleep, mad at the disturbance. Half naked, she stuck her head out the door to yell at the commotion.

"The war is over!" shouted Mrs. Wagner.

"Uh...what?" said Mrs. Anderson.

"The war is over!" someone else yelled.

"When?"

"It was just announced on the radio."

Observing all the excitement, Mrs. Anderson joined in. "Woo, woo!" she cheered, throwing her arms out and exposing herself in her night clothes as she stumbled into a circle of dancing women, radios blasting away in the background, continually announcing V-Day.

Billy and Mary were down the block on their way to the market to buy some candy with five cents each when an enormous, noisy crowd appeared in the streets and all around them.

"The war is over! The war is over! V-Day!" someone yelled.

It didn't take long for people to fill the streets in the Dimond District and across the nation. Everybody in the apartment headed down the front stairs into the street except for Lois, who was still passed out in bed with a high fever. Mrs. Bigbottom's mother, who was somehow carried down the stairs, disappeared among the crowd, never to be seen again. The street was packed with people standing shoulder to shoulder.

Billy grabbed Mary's hand to keep her from being crushed. All traffic had stopped on the main street at the edge of the village. The roads were filled with servicemen, civilians, and children. Everyone seemed to have a bottle of booze. People were kissing and hugging and every sailor, soldier, and other servicemen had a young woman in their arms. Mary was scooped up and passed around in the crowd, people calling her a "little princess." Her eyes brightened as she received hugs and kisses. Mary had never had this much attention in her life. Billy watched and Mary laughed and smiled, stuffing a big piece of chocolate into her mouth that was given to her as she sailed above the heads of the servicemen.

Somebody handed Billy a Coke and he drank merrily. Billy was watching Mary, and when she was set down, he grabbed her hand and headed for the market. In front, the owners were giving away candy, cookies, drinks, and all sorts of things. The kids had never seen such an assortment of free goodies, and chowed down as much as they could hold. Billy filled his pockets with candy and cookies after stuffing his stomach. Entering the middle of the crowd again, Mary, the little princess, with her chocolate-stained face and sticky candy covered dress, was tossed around for a second time.

Sometime in the middle of the night, Billy and Mary dragged themselves up the stairs. There was a party going on in every apartment. They entered their apartment through the open door and stumbled into bed covered in chocolate, cookie crumbs, candy stains, and spilled Coke.

Around 9:00 the next morning, Lois woke up. Her fever had passed. While crawling out of bed, she saw a Navy uniform on the floor in front of her with a man inside, sound asleep. The front door was wide open, and not a sound could be heard except for the officer snoring.

“What the hell?” she screamed, weakly kicking at the sailor. “Get out! Get out of my house.”

The sailor woke up and stumbled out of her apartment and collapsed in the hall. Lois slammed the door and locked it.

She didn't know the war was over.