The Stone Wall

People would reference the stone wall when giving directions. If you said, “Do you know the big stone wall next to the cemetery on Graffen Street?” people would always know what you meant.

I wouldn’t pass the wall often—it wasn’t really on my way to anywhere I normally went. When I did see it, however, the wall reminded me of my family.

It was approximately three hundred feet long and stuck out of the ground at the low end only about a foot. By the time the wall reached the other end however, it towered twenty-five feet high, every four feet or so adding another row of stones to the top to follow the contours of the ground. The stones were long, about five feet end to end, and about one foot thick. Thirty feet from the end, the wall gracefully bent to the right following the slight turn in the street it paralleled. The bend was graceful and the top perfectly level. True craftsmanship—something to be admired.

Over the years the stone had aged, smoothed by rain, stained by groundwater. The wall once withstood a direct hit from a tornado without needing any repairs. It was built to last.

I first noticed it as a child. We would pass the wall on our way out of town. I didn’t realize its place in my family’s history then but admired it, nevertheless. It was beautifully simple, impressively massive, admirably strong.

As I grew older and had occasion to show people around, I always included it in the tour, especially when the visitors were family members. By then, I knew my family’s connection with it.

It prevented the earth from washing away, shaping the landscape for seventy-five years. It was solid, like the men who built it—my uncles.

Uncle Chet, the husband of my father's only sister, learned masonry from his father. Uncle Chet was a proud policeman, with stories and adventures to dazzle his nieces and nephews. On his days off, he worked with my Dad's brother, Uncle Joe. They built things.

Uncle Chet had a restless energy that didn't allow for time to sit unless there was a fishing pole in his hand. He'd show his nieces and nephews once each trip how to bait their hooks, then it was up to us. This was the same way he taught his daughter to finish concrete. A little wisp of a girl, she showed up on concrete pours to be greeted by the laughs of the laborers, until she quietly went to work and they saw the smooth as silk finish she created.

When the cemetery needed a wall built, not just a decorative wall but a big stone retaining wall, the board of directors hired my uncles. They completed the wall before I was born. It remained long after both of them were dead, and gave me pause to be proud every time I drove past. Seeing it helped me remember them and reminded me of how important uncles can be to a boy.

I was twelve and Uncle Chet retired from the police force when he and Uncle Joe built a concrete block cabin near the river. They would work for others Monday through Friday. Then, on Friday night they would drive an hour northwest of town and work on the cabin, not returning home until Sunday evening, tired but happy.

As often as I could, I went with them, sitting between my uncles in the truck with my legs straddling the gear shift. After a couple of times shifting gears, Uncle Chet decided his hand was too close to my manhood for his

liking, so he taught me to operate the gear shift. He expected me to anticipate when he would hit the clutch and it was time to wrestle the shifter up one gear. When I occasionally hit reverse instead of third, Uncle Joe would chortle and Uncle Chet would say, “Too far right.” Harmless, in comparison to the growl I knew he was suppressing. And when I worked through the four gears without grinding any, his praise was effusive.

Uncle Chet told me a story once that in his estimation required a touch of off-color language. This drew a remonstration from my aunt.

“Don’t talk that way in front of the boy,” she told him. “His father doesn’t talk that way in front of him.”

That was true. My father worked in an office and I can count on one hand the number of times I heard him say, “Damn,” despite raising seven boys.

“His father can teach him the nice side of life, I’ll teach him the real side of it,” Uncle Chet replied, much to my Aunt’s disapproval and my pleasure. When you’re fourteen, there’s something to be said about an uncle who’s not afraid to use a four-letter word or two in front of you.

My family was not the type to convene and celebrate the milestones of its members. In fact, except for Uncle Chet and Aunt Louisa, I sometimes wondered if my aunts and uncles knew who I was. Whenever I needed something, however, one of them would be there with a word of support, a suggestion of where a summer job might be found, a link to the broader family.

Kind of like that wall. Some of the stones were hundreds of feet apart, but they were linked together, just as I was with my cousins, aunts, uncles, and siblings. Each helped the other.

So when I drove past the wall a few years ago and saw the scaffolding erected next to it, I wondered what was being done. To my dismay, I saw that someone was covering it with new stones. I could tell by the way the new stone was being attached to the old wall that it did't have anything to do with its structural integrity; it was strictly cosmetic. Someone had decided they did not like the looks of my beautiful family wall. It was as if my parents and each of my uncles and aunts, all dead for years, were dying again. Something personal was being taken from me, and I began to go out of my way to watch the "progress," as if my presence would slow it down. Inexorably, however, the work continued and the wall was covered. A part of my family history was gone.

I felt angry that others couldn't see the beauty of the wall. If it had been crumbling I could have understood, but somebody just wanted to beautify something that was already beautiful.

I reflected on all those family members who had gone before me, those I knew, as well as those I had never known. The ones I had never known taught those I knew, who had then taught me. I thought of how proud they were of me when I finished law school. They knew, long before I did, that even though they taught me nothing of the law because they weren't lawyers, the life lessons they taught would make me a lawyer to be respected and trusted.

I thought of the many occasions when they could have quickly hammered a nail but instead took the time to show a young boy how to do it. They could have pushed the wheel barrow but they let me try, even though I would often let it fall to the side and lose the load, which would then have to be shoveled into the barrow again. The worst I ever heard was my Uncle Chet's familiar, "Tsk, tsk, tsk," as he shook his head. They

showed me the dignity of work and of the working man so that as a lawyer I respected all my clients, not just the professionals and the well-to-do. They taught me to work hard and laugh loud, especially at myself.

I have not lost the lessons my family taught me, even though I have lost my family. Likewise, the original wall is out of sight, but it still does its job, holding the earth back behind its cosmetic façade.

Everything in life is fleeting, except for what we choose to keep within us and pass on. We can cover walls and lose family but we take forward what has been taught to us, and we teach it to the next generation. My uncles were more than a wall, my parents and family members more than random stones. All of them, those I knew and those I didn't, live within me as I go forward. Their lessons, taught to me thoroughly, are immortal as long as I pass them on.

The time has come for me to be a stone in the wall for the next generation. My family prepared me well for the task.