Gold-Dust Grandpa

Riverside grandfather staked his claim to a solitary life.

By Robert O'Neal, Ocala, Florida

I was 9 years old when I met my maternal grandfather for the first and only time, in 1939.

My uncle was taking me by car from Los Angeles, where I lived with my mother and grandma, to Seattle, where I was to spend the summer with an aunt.

On the way, we stopped at a spot near Ned Day, Oregon. My first surprise was that my grandfather lived in a small tent near a small river. That's where we stayed during our 3-day visit.

My grandpa was a gold prospector who panned for gold using either a large metal pan or a sluice, a larger wooden device that accomplished the same thing.

The object was to dig into the moving water to collect sand, then let it filter out, hopefully leaving small particles of gold.

Every morning, I'd wake up to the scent and sound of bacon frying in a pan on a metal stand over an open fire. For 3 days, we had eggs and bacon with fried potatoes. For lunch and dinner, we had beans with either bacon or ham. This was a delightful diet for a boy living with a grandmother who insisted on two vegetables with dinner.

After breakfast, my uncle started panning with his father. It looked pretty easy, and I was eager to try.

Just before noon, my grandfather handed me the large pan and

asked if I was ready to “get some gold.”

My grandfather’s large hands covered mine as I dug into the riverbed, lifted the pan up and began to shake and dip it from side to side. The water was ice-cold.

In a short time, most of the sand and pebbles were gone. Grandfather took my finger and pushed it into the pan’s bottom to show me the gold particles that remained. I remember being more impressed with the process than the actual gold.

Trip to Town

That afternoon, we went into the town of Ned Day for provisions, as my grandfather called them. Ned Day is where he rented a room 4 months out of the year.

Grandfather paid for his supplies with gold contained in a small pouch. The store owner then weighed the pouch and announced the number of ounces, and a credit was entered in a large, green ledger book stored under the counter.

I’d been told that I could pick out candy and was wandering the store looking for the familiar wrapped brands that I had back home. Not at this store. All of the candy was contained in 12 large jars that sat on top of the display counter—high enough to see into but not low enough to reach.

For the rest of my visit, I panned a little more and spent a lot of time pretending I was Tarzan, diving from a tree into a pool created from damming and diverting part of the river.

When I left, my grandfather gave me a good-sized gold nugget. My mother put it away for safekeeping, but I have no idea what happened to it.

My uncle had some communication with my grandfather, perhaps

through a post-office box. I remember getting an occasional Christmas card from Grandfather, but neither my mother nor my grandmother—his ex-wife—ever corresponded with him, as far as I can recall.

I also can't remember anyone expressing an opinion about him living alone. My grandfather prospected until he was placed in a rest home, when he was 74, and he lived 3 more years.

Some may have considered Grandfather's life a lonely one, but it was the life he chose.