

Frank E. Irvin, Sr.

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Table of Contents

<i>Youngster in Spring</i>	3
Between Spring and Houston	4
My Father	6
My Mother	7
Brothers and Sisters	8
Cousins.....	10
<i>Young Man in Houston</i>	11
Dona	12
Work	13
<i>Family Man in California</i>	15
Frank Jr.....	16
Lab Work	16
The Draft	17
Moving to Berkeley.....	18
Back to Oakland	19
Nell	19
The Berkeley Chemistry Department.....	20
Glaucoma.....	21
<i>Ghana and After</i>	22
Back from Ghana	24
Depression	24
Retirement.....	26
<i>Celebration at 85</i>	26
From Keith Alexander	26
From Sharon Chin.....	27
From Chester James.....	28
From Stephanie Floyd Johnson.....	29
From Steven Mar.....	30
From Michael W. Murphy.....	30
From Ellis Rankin	31
From Tim Upshaw.....	32
From Theodosia Valrey.....	32

Youngster in Spring

I was delivered by a midwife at my mother's house on January 5, 1919, in Spring, Texas, a small town about 20 miles north of Houston. My mother Sarah had inherited the house, on a lot of several acres, from her first husband. She and my father Ed later built a new house right next to that house, on the same acreage. It's the new house I remember best. A porch ran along the whole front. On the left side of the house, as you looked at it from the front, we had two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a screened-in back porch. On the other side, we had a living room, a dining room, and the kitchen. There were doors onto the back porch from the back bedroom and from the kitchen. I still dream about the house. Just recently, I dreamed about being up late in the dining room, locking the front door, and putting out the electric lights in the living room on my way to bed. That's just a dream. There was no electricity in that house when I lived there.

The garden might have been 40 by 100 feet. We grew collard greens, radishes, peas, onions, string beans, and tomatoes. I remember running strings for the bean plants to grow up. I think we also had cantaloupes and watermelons. Except for the garden, we never made much use of the acreage. The road ran right in front of the house. There was a little clearing behind the house, but then trees behind that, a lot of pines and a few oaks.

The barn was used mainly for sheltering horses. My oldest brother, Johnny, used to trade in horses. He had a partner, and they would buy young horses, train them for working, and then resell them. I suppose there were often two or three horses in the barn. By the time I was large enough to ride, I had my own horse, a red roan named Snip. Later on, my father gave me a new saddle. I enjoyed riding immensely. It was probably a mile and a half from our house down to the center of town. There was no mail delivery, so I would often ride down to the post office and country store. There was not too much to the downtown: the railroad station, the post office, the country store, a bank, and another little store or two. There was no problem riding an unshod horse around town, because the roads that weren't dirt were oyster shell. Some of my friends also had horses. Sometimes we would ride over to Westfield. I think we could buy some things cheaper there than in Spring.

I still remember the friends I rode with: Clifford Map, Herman Knox, Joel Sayles, Eugene Wells, and the Silas brothers. Joel died two or three years ago. I had lost track of him for years, but I was talking with Mrs. Jefferson, who remembered when he left Spring and went to Chicago and also remembered that one of his sisters still lived in Spring. She was able to get his telephone number for me. When I called, he was not that coherent. His wife said he had been ill.

We would hunt for rabbits and birds. Play baseball. There wasn't much basketball. Sometimes we would fish. There was a creek, Spring Creek, which ran a mile or so from our property. You could catch perch and eel. There were also crab in that stream. We would catch them with a string baited with beef. When they started to nibble on the beef, we would catch them in a net, with a handle about the length of a shovel or hoe handle. Fishing at night was against the law, but you could hunt at night - raccoons and possums. Some people ate armadillos, and some wouldn't. My mother wouldn't eat them, so if we shot one, someone else's mother would cook it.

Spring was a very small town, but we formed the kind of community that doesn't exist nowadays. In those days, the community would build barns and houses for people. If someone could get the money together to buy materials, their family and friends would come to do the work in the evenings and on Saturdays. All you would expect was dinner (lunch). You would have been insulted if someone offered you money. I remember once helping put up a barn that hardly required any money for materials. It was all logs and adobe.

There were three stores where you could buy groceries. The largest was the general store run by the three Klein brothers. They sold animal feed, gasoline, and motor oil. There was also a smaller store, also run by whites. The third store was owned and operated by a black couple, the Branches. Their prices were a little higher, because they were small, and anyone black would have had to pay higher prices to the wholesalers. They were in the black neighborhood, but a few whites also traded there, because it was near them and stayed open later. All the grocery stores sold on credit in those days. My father was paid every two weeks, and that's when we paid the grocery bill.

Aside from Kleins' there were two service stations where you could buy gasoline—one in town and another out on the highway that ran from Dallas down to Houston. The one on the highway had a repair shop.

My brother E.J. had a car, and I learned to drive by watching him. One day, when I was 11, he left the keys in the car, and I jumped in and drove it off, just to prove to myself that I could. He was upset, but my father calmed him down. I would bring the car back, he told him.

Between Spring and Houston

My father worked at Missouri Pacific's roundhouse in Spring. When I was in the third grade, Missouri Pacific moved the roundhouse to Houston. So we moved too. I was not enthusiastic about it. I have a photograph of myself, dressed up with a white shirt and tie, sitting at a desk in Mrs. Price's class in the Dunbar Elementary School in Houston. I was not a happy camper. I wanted to be back in the Colored Elementary School in Spring, five blocks from our house, where no one had to get their picture taken in a tie.

My mother didn't like it in Houston either. Houston was a big town, where you didn't know anybody. There was a lot of violence, especially on Saturday night. So after a couple years, we moved back to our house in Spring, and my father commuted to work in Houston on his railroad pass. That was hard, too. After a couple of years we tried Houston again, and then we moved back to Spring again. We would rent in Houston, but we always kept our house in Spring.

I so have some fond memories of Houston. The fondest is listening to prize fights on the crystal set radio that a restaurant owner put in his window, not far from our house. I think Joe Louis was already a contender in those years, although he didn't start his reign as heavyweight champion until 1937. Four or five of us kids would gather around to listen once a week or so.

When I was in high school, we were back living in Spring, but I went to the Phillis Wheatley High School in Houston. I had three good friends in high school, Emmet “Stokes” Marshall, David Pearson, and Carl Jones. They are all dead. They used to come spend the weekend with us in Spring. Once Emmet was going to get on the good side of my father, and so he asked him, “What would you like to have to drink?” My father said, “Well son, I drink from shit to pound cake. You can’t miss me.”

My dad would take the train to Houston in the morning, while I would drive in. Then in the evening I would pick him up on the way home. We did that from the time when school started in 1933 until I graduated in 1935. I was only 14 in 1933, but by then I had a driver’s license. We drove a 1931 Chevrolet sport coupe with a rumble seat - a back seat outside the cab that you could fold down when you were not using it. My father bought the car used. It was our family car, but neither my mother nor my father ever learned how to drive. So after my brothers left home, I was the driver. I called it my car.

I gave a lot of people rides in that Chevy. I took people in the family where they needed to go, and often just took people for joy rides – three or four miles around the countryside, perhaps. One of the friends I drove around was Van Harris, who was four or five years younger than I. The only one of my Spring friends still living; he now lives in Houston. Another friend from that time, Johnny, was about the same age as Van. He died in Houston in December 2004. His daughter lives not too far from us in Oakland and manages the insurance agency that handles our house and car insurance. She left a message on our phone to tell us about her father’s death.

I drove the Chevy as long as I lived at home, and when I finally moved out, when Dona and I set up housekeeping in 1937, my folks gave it to me. Usually one or two of my brothers was living in the house, and they could drive my parents where they needed to go. That continued until my parents died in the 1950s.

Houston had a lot more choices for grocery shopping than Spring. I remember Winegardens, Heinkes, and A&P. Each one of them had a bakery, a full sized butcher shop, and a restaurant. They also sold animal feed – not as much as the stores in the country, but in those days there were still farm animals in the city. When I was twelve or thirteen, I knew the prices of things in the stores. I told my father he didn’t shop well enough. So he had me take over the food shopping, and I did a good job. I studied the weekend sales, and I knew the price of just about everything you would use in the house. I didn’t write down a damn thing. Someone would ask me the price of five pounds of sugar, and I could tell them the price at all the stores. I have tried to understand the root of my interest in saving money, but I can’t pin it down. My father didn’t throw away money, but he was not that careful. And my mother would give away any damn thing.

My parents died in the 1950s. After that, my brother Louis, who lived in Houston, took care of the property in Spring. Before he died, about 1988, he talked with me about selling the property. We were the only ones left, he said, and he wanted to spend his share of the money before he died. I agreed, on the condition that before we split the proceeds of the sale, he deduct what he had spent on taxes and upkeep over the years. He didn’t want to do that, but he finally agreed. We divided the money that was left four ways - one share for him, one share for me, one

share for the widow of our brother Jeff, and one share for the daughter of our sister Leola. Each of us got several thousand dollars. The property was divided, and now it has modern houses on it. It's really part of greater Houston.

My Father

My father, Edward Irvin, was born on September 15, 1885, in Huntsville, Texas, a much larger town about sixty miles north of Spring. He had only one sibling, his sister. I didn't know his parents. After being raised in Huntsville, both he and his sister moved to Spring, no doubt because the Missouri Pacific Railroad had located a mechanical hub and roundhouse there. Land and labor was a lot cheaper in Spring than in Houston. My father was an excellent machinist. As an African-American, he was not allowed to be a master mechanic, but the white machinists he trained would become master mechanics.

My dad and I were very close. He and I used to tell each other dirty jokes. My mother would get after him for it. She said, "The boy won't respect you." He said, "No, that won't happen. He knows I'm his father, and I know he's my son."

I remember a lot of his sayings:

- It's a million miles from your head to your hands.
- You're up shit creek without a paddle.
- Sometimes a hard head makes a soft ass.
- Money burns a hole in some people's pockets.

I called him papa, but his nickname was Dirty Red, probably because of his red complexion and the grease he picked up in the roundhouse. I had the same red complexion, and they called me Bugger Red. Once in the late 50s or early 60s, as I was walking into a bank in Berkeley, a fellow said to me, "How are you, Bugger Red?" I said, "Who are you? I haven't heard that name in thirty years." He said, "I knew your father for years, and no one could look that much like him without being his son." The fellow's name was Bob Bolton. I had known him when I was a child, and I knew that his family had joined the migration from Texas to California, but I hadn't had any contact with him during all that time.

My dad was quite a drinker in his early days. During most of his life, Texas was a dry state. He used to make distilleries for people, and they would pay him with the whiskey they made. He liked to read newspapers, and one of his favorite things was to sit down after dinner to read his newspaper and drink his liquor. He would drink it out of a fruit jar. He never missed any time from work. In the early years, he worked seven days a week, with no vacation and no sick leave. In the last fifteen years or so of his working life, he did get a week's vacation.

Another thing I remember about my father. Being a machinist, he used a lot of tools. But he would never borrow tools. I remember once he and I were working on something, and he needed a tool he didn't have. I asked him if he wanted me to borrow it from someone I knew had it. He told me no. "Borrowing is next to begging, and I don't beg from any s.o.b." I never remember him borrowing anything from anyone.

I know that he finished high school, but he never discussed his childhood or his side of the family with me. I remember asking him about his parents once or twice, but he just set it aside. After that, I figured he was not going to tell me anything, and I didn't keep asking him.

His sister and brother-in-law, Mary and Banks Porter, lived in Spring. In the time I knew him, Banks never had a job. He came by the house quite often, usually looking for a free meal and coffee. When my mother offered it, he would always say, "Don't care if I do." That phrase always comes to my mind when someone offers me something: "Don't care if I do."

My father retired before I left Texas. I think he would have worked longer, but he had a stroke that paralyzed his left side. This must have been about 1940. He was in the hospital for several weeks. We used to go visit him, and once he said, "You know, I think I can walk." So we talked with the nurse, who didn't think he could. He asked her to help him get out of bed. But she wouldn't. So he asked me to help him. I helped him stand up, and then I turned him loose. He tried to take a step and fell. He used a lot of profanity. He said, help me back in bed, but don't come back until I call you. And when I call you, I will be walking. I argued with him, because I would miss not seeing him, but he had his way. When the hospital called to say he could come home, they said he would have to go in a wheelchair. They told him he would always be wheelchair bound. He said no, he would not put up with that. After a while, he was walking with a walking stick. He kept improving.

He died in 1954 of a heart attack. He was 69. For a long time, that seemed to be a ceiling for my family. Johnny and Henry were no older than that when they died in the mid 60s, while Dona and I were in Ghana. A few years after we got back, Jeff and E.J. also died without getting past 69. My older brother Louis was the first one to live longer. He was 75 when he died, in 1988.

My Mother

My mother, Sarah Nancy Elizabeth Lee, was born on August 11, 1884, and reared in Charleston, South Carolina. She had six sisters and two brothers. That makes nine children. The whole family migrated together to Texas.

Mama was a very friendly and she had a lot of friends that she saw in church and visited back and forth with. She did a lot of quilting with her friends. My father put hooks up on the ceiling to hold a quilting frame, and when she wasn't using it, she could pull it up out of the way with a pulley.

The most impressive thing about my mother was that she was very, very kindhearted. Her nickname was Miss Sweet. I was about 10 years old when the depression hit, and we lived very close to a railroad track. People who rode the freight trains would sometimes get off and ask for food and help, and I never remember my mother having anything and turning anyone down. Not only people traveling the freight trains but also other people in town. My father always had a job, and many people didn't. Sometimes this caused a little friction between my parents. He sometimes felt his wife was giving away too much, but she said, "As long as we have something, they will have something."

My mother was a Methodist. She went to church regularly. Often it was just me and her. Sometimes my brother Lewis, the next youngest, would come. My father said, if you leave God alone, he will probably forget about you. She did finally persuade him to join the church at the very end of his life, but only to make her happy. I probably went up until high school. I didn't go to church after that until Dona and I got married, and then we went to a Baptist Church in Houston.

There were three African-American churches in Spring – Methodist, Baptist, and Sanctified (Church of God in Christ). I don't remember much difference between the Methodists and Baptists, but they both looked down on the Sanctified. It seems to me that there was a different ring in the church bells. If a church member made there transition, you could tell whether it was Methodist or a Baptist. The Sanctified didn't have a bell; they did damn well to get a building.

I am still in contact with a young friend of my mother's, who still lives in Spring. Her name is Elma Jefferson. I didn't know Mrs. Jefferson as a child, but she saw a lot of my mother after I left Texas, and she has the same memory of how giving my mother was. I first met Mrs. Jefferson in Hawthorne, Nevada, where I have a second cousin. When he and his wife celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary, he invited us and also his two younger siblings from Texas. His youngest brother, it turns out, is married to a daughter of Mrs. Jefferson, and she was also at the celebration. When she heard that I was named Frank and lived in Oakland, she asked me if my mother, by any chance, was named Miss Sweet. I said yes. She said that my mother spoke of me many times.

My mother didn't like traveling. My father wanted to come see us in California in the 40s, but my mother didn't want to, and so they never did. She died in the late 50s, about six years after my father.

Brothers and Sisters

I was the only child my mother and father had together, but they both had children from previous marriages. Both their spouses had died; my mother's husband first. My mother had six children by her first marriage - five boys and one girl. From youngest to oldest: Louis, Jeff, E.J., Henry, Leola, and Johnny. They all had their father's name, Williams. My father had one boy and one girl by his first marriage - Demerit and Annabelle. All eight have made their transition now.

Of the whole group, I was the only one to leave Texas. My mother's six other children all moved to Houston and lived there all their lives. When I can first remember, the four youngest - Louis, Jeff, E.J., and Henry - were still living with us in Spring.

I knew Louis best, because he was closest to me in age, about six years older than me. He was shorter than me, probably the shortest in the family. He had a big mouth, braggadocian as all hell. He inflated everything. He would tell you a big wide story, but then as you questioned him, it would get smaller and smaller, until it didn't amount to anything at all. I think they called him Big Man. But he was a good person at the core. During the war years, he

worked as a Pullman porter. I don't remember what he did after that, because I didn't keep in close touch with my family in Houston after my parents died.

Louis's three children, Madeleine Edgely, Peggy Chance, and Bernard Williams, are still living in Houston. At one time Madeleine had financial problems, and I was sending her money. Another cousin wrote me to say that he felt Madeleine was taking advantage of me, and so I only sent her half the money she asked for the next time. After that she quit writing to me, and so I wrote to her explaining what had happened. She wrote back to tell me that she felt she had been doing me a favor to take my money.

Jeff was about two years older than Louis, about eight years older than me. He always aspired to be a businessman, and he did accumulate some property. In the late 60s and 70s, he ran a successful combination restaurant and nightclub - they were popular in Houston in those years. I think he sold the business before his death, because he had heart trouble during his later years. His widow and son went through the money pretty quickly. The son was interested in race cars.

Jeff was married three times and had two kids, a daughter from his first wife and the son from his third. The daughter and son are still alive in Houston. Because the money from the Spring property went to Jeff's widow, the daughter felt left out. She complained to me, and so I sent her a few hundred dollars from my share. She wrote back to say that she thought I would give her all my share, because I didn't need it.

E.J. came next - he was older than Jeff. I think the E stood for Elijah. E.J. was on the self-sufficient side. I remember him once giving a smart-aleck response when my mother gave him some instruction. She sat down on him and started to spank him from the head down. She was pretty stout. He started to pray, "Lord come down and save me, because my mother is going to kill me." She said, "You're right, I am going to kill you, because you don't talk to me that way. You respect me." In those days you didn't get from kids the shit about, "No, I'm not going to do that."

I know E.J. had three children, but he wasn't so close to the family, and so I don't know much about him as an adult. After I left Houston, I kept in touch mainly through my parents and then through my brothers Louis and Jeff, and they didn't speak much about E.J.

The oldest of the four boys at home when I first remember was Henry. He never had children. Henry was an interesting guy. He married once and didn't stay married for a month. He said he had got drunk and got married. He was very tough. He was the only one of all of us who went into the service. While he was there, he was found to have diabetes. Later on, after he came out of the service, he lost a foot, probably his left foot. Then he lost part of his left leg. Later he lost his right leg. But there was a lot of trucking work in Spring at the time, because they were pulping trees to make paper. Even with his disability, he wanted to have a trucking company and to drive one of the trucks himself. That is what he did. He drove his truck without any legs.

My sister Leola came next. She was much like my mother. She would give away everything that she had. She was already married and out of the house when I first remember. She lived in Rayford, a town even smaller than Spring. It was a farm town, probably five or six miles north of Spring. It was especially known for its watermelons, but also for its yams and potatoes. They even grew sugarcane there. Eventually she and her family moved to Houston. She died thirty years ago. She had two boys, who are also deceased, and a girl, Johnnie Mae, still living in Houston. Johnnie Mae must be six or seven years younger than me. She is very much like my mother in size – about five feet tall and five feet wide.

The oldest of my mother's children was Johnny. He was so much older than me that I remember hardly anything about him. I remember him being married, and I know he didn't have any children.

Alice, the mother of my father's first wife, who took care of Demerit and Anabelle, lived in Spring, and I got to know her quite well. But I never had much contact with Demerit and Anabelle themselves. Demerit always lived in Texas. He had no children, but his wife Thelma still lives in Waco. Annabelle had one daughter, Mary Alice Phillips, who lives in Los Angeles. After she had a stroke, Annabelle moved to live with Mary Alice in Los Angeles and died there.

Between the death of his first wife and his marriage to my mother, my father had another daughter, Lee Etta. Lee Etta's mother lived in San Antonio, where my father had been working temporarily, training machinists. I learned some of these details only in the last ten years or so, talking with Lee in Riverside after her husband died. He wanted to marry her, but she didn't want to marry him. She married someone else several years later. San Antonio was a long way from Houston in those days, but Lee Etta would come visit from time to time. My wife Dona never met her until 1943 or so, in Vallejo, California. Lee Etta now lives in Riverside, California. Her mother, who lived to be about 90, joined her there before her death. Dona and I went to the funeral.

Cousins

I knew all eight of my aunts and uncles on my mother's side. My mother was the third oldest. The oldest was her brother Joseph. Then came her sister Laura. After my mother, there were two sisters, I think, nicknamed Coot and Babe. I don't remember much about them. Then came the other brother, Eldridge. Then Edna, Frances and Emmaline.

My mother's parents died when her two youngest sisters, Frances and Emmaline, were teenagers, and she took responsibility for them. I don't think she went to high school at all. I know she would have wanted to do the most she could for Frances and Emmaline. We called them Aunt Woman (Frances) and Aunt Honey (Emmaline). I was named after Frances.

Joseph, the oldest, lived in a different town; I didn't see him very often. I think he had children, but I don't remember how many. Aunt Laura had two daughters, Ethel and Roberta, and a son. They were all older than I, but they all lived in Spring, and I knew them pretty well when I very young. Most of the visiting was on Sundays, I think. They did not live real close to us, but we would walk to their house. Of course, you also ran into people at the store or the post office, and you heard about them from others. The son never married, but the two daughters did,

and they had youngsters. Ethel had three sons and a daughter. Roberta had two sons and a daughter, Robert (named after his uncle Eldridge), Willy, and Laura (named after her grandmother).

Eldridge had one child. That's about all I remember about him. The three youngest sisters, Edna, Frances and Emmaline, were all married with children and all went to Oakland, probably in the late 20s. They are responsible for my Oakland cousins. Aunt Edna had three youngsters, two girls and a boy. Aunt Frances had only one child, a girl named Ruby. Aunt Emmaline had three sons, first Kimmet and then the two twins, Clemal (also called by his middle name, Clarence) and Clenile.

I was the youngest of all the cousins. Even Clarence and Clenile were four or five years older than I. Clarence is the one who initiated our going to Oakland. We stayed briefly with Aunt Emmaline when we first went to Oakland in 1942, and then we lived in a three story house; Clenile and his wife lived on the top floor, and we lived on the first floor. Housing was very tight. People were repairing garages and renting them out.

Young Man in Houston

My father put great importance on my education. My going to school, for my father, was like Nell's going to school was for Dona and me. It was never "Are you?" It was "Where are you going to go?" It was taken for granted that I would finish high school.

My high school was the Phillis Wheatley High School in Houston. In those days, high school, at least for colored people, was two years: the 10th and 11th grade. I don't remember when they brought in the 12th grade.

We had some very dedicated teachers. The thought about going to college probably came from a high school mathematics teacher, J.C. Sanderson. We were talking one day, probably in the 11th grade, and I said I thought I could write a trigonometry textbook. He said, "You did well in trigonometry, but I don't think you can write a textbook." In my high school annual, he wrote, "Remember that $\sin^2\theta + \cos^2\theta = 1$." He would talk about school subjects with me, and also about getting along in life.

My social studies teacher, Mr. McDade, was also very dedicated. During this period, in the 30s, segregation was very strong in Texas. Mr. McDade would talk to me not only about getting along in the outside world, but also about getting along in the inside world - how a person could deal on the inside with what the country did to African Americans. These fellows felt that there were certain things that you should know, and certain ways that you should act, perform. If you were ready to receive it, they would offer it.

The University of Houston, in those days, was for white students. But there was also a college for black students: Houston College for Negroes. Later, about 1947, Texas Southern was invented. It absorbed Houston College for Negroes and added professional schools. It is

now the largest African-American university in the country. But Hampton, in Virginia, is the richest.

I entered Houston College for Negroes in 1935, when I was 16 years old. At that point, my parents moved back to Houston again, so that I could live at home with the family there.

Dona

Dona and I graduated from the same high school, Phillis Wheatley in Houston, but I didn't meet her there, because we didn't overlap. She graduated in June 1933, and I entered in September 1933. When she finished Phillis Wheatley, she went to Prairie View, because her sister and her sister's husband had a job and house there. Prairie View was a state college, about 50 miles or so from Houston.

In 1935, the same year I started at Houston College for Negroes, Dona transferred there. Her father had died, and her mother wanted her to return to Houston to help at home.

I had a classmate named George Steiner, who knew Dona. I had seen Dona on campus, in the library, and somehow it came to my attention that George knew her. So I asked him, "Who is that girl with the good-looking legs?" Dona had also asked George about me. So he introduced us, and we started talking together quite a bit.

In 1936, Duke Ellington came to Houston. Bands like Ellington's and Arty Shaw's would perform in the Majestic Theatre, in downtown Houston. You could go there; there was a section in the balcony set aside for African Americans. But the main music instructor at Houston College for Negroes, a lady named Johnnie Mae Newton, was a good friend of Ellington's. She asked him if he would come to her house one evening to talk with some of her students, and Dona and I were invited. When we went to Newton's house, various people were gathered listening to Duke at the piano. I asked Dona if she would come out on the porch, which probably ran three-fourths of the way around the house, because I wanted to ask her something. She said yes. It was Saint Patrick's Day, 1936. I asked her if we could go steady. I don't remember whether she said yes or whether she said she would think about it. She must have said yes, because I remember this being the connecting time for us.

In April 1937, Dona told me that we were getting very serious. She felt we should get married. But she didn't want to tell her mother about it. I said, no, I don't want to tell my folks about it, either. Because the damn money would be cut off!

In those days, births, deaths, marriages, and divorces were all reported in the Houston newspaper. But that was only for Houston and the towns nearby. If you went far enough away from Houston, what you did wouldn't show up in the Houston newspaper. Most of the classes at Houston College for Negroes were held in the evenings. So before going to class that afternoon and evening, we went to a little town called Tomball. We asked around about where we could get married, and we were directed to the store run by the Justice of the Peace. "You go over there, and he will marry you." We went over to the store. They sold sugar, beans, peas, rice, corn - a lot of things in barrels. Nails, shovels, picks. It was a general store. The fellow said, "What do you want?" We said, "We want to get married." He said, "Where are your

witnesses?" We said, "We are from Houston, and we came to get married secretly." He said, "You have to have witnesses." We said, "We don't know anybody here." So he said, "Let me look outside and see if I can find somebody." He looked outside and saw a little boy with a chicken. He said, "Hey, Tommy, come witness these n - s getting married." So Tommy came in and witnessed our marriage while he held his chicken under his arm. We have a picture of the scene that an art student at Berkeley painted for us. After the justice pronounced us man and wife, we went back and went to class. Then we went back to our parents' houses. Dona graduated from college in June 1937, a couple months after we got married.

We kept our marriage secret for nearly a year. But Dona got pregnant, and when that began to show, everything was out. We had to start housekeeping, and I had to get a job. Our son, Frank E. Irvin, Jr., was born March 2, 1938.

Dona's family home was on the corner of Sumpter and Stevens Street. But Dona's mother also owned a house right behind, facing the Sumpter Street side, 2514 Sumpter. It had four rooms (kitchen, living room, bedroom, dining room), and her mother rented it to us for \$10 a month.

Work

In 1938, when Frank Jr. was born, Dona had already graduated from Houston College for Negroes, but I was only finishing my junior year. I had to drop out and go to work to support my family.

The first thing I did was sell my car and buy a truck, so I could do landscaping work. I hauled in topsoil and planted grass to make lawns in a new subdivision. I put in Saint Augustine grass. It covered the ground like a carpet. That was new in those days. But the work turned out to be very hard, and after everyone in the new subdivision had a lawn, it became very irregular.

On Sundays, I would often spend a few hours chauffeuring a fellow named Hurley. His car was a Pierce-Arrow, a very nice car. He paid me a dollar and a half for the Sunday drive. One day he offered me some cigars. There are fifty cigars in a box. He said, "Reach in the box, and you can have all you can get on one grab." My fingers got a yard long. He said, "I didn't know you were going to take the whole box." Those were about the best cigars I ever smoked.

After about a year, I gave up the landscaping business and went to work at a supermarket named Winegardens, which had a self-contained bakery, butcher shop, and restaurant. I worked in the restaurant section, washing dishes. I sold the truck, and after that we didn't have a car. I made \$7 a week, and we saved a dollar and a half of it. After that time, we always had some savings. We were never flat broke.

Later on, I went to work for a man named Ben Cohen. He had a lot of property. He wanted someone to do maintenance work and to drive him around town. He owned a four-unit apartment building. He lived in one apartment and rented out the other three. I think I learned a lot from him.

When I first started working for Cohen, I would ride the streetcar to work. He and I were

talking one day, and he asked me, "How do you get to and from work?" I said, "I ride the streetcar." He said, "What does it cost you?" In those days, you could buy a pass. You paid a dollar for the pass, and then you put a nickel in the turnstile. At any rate, the total for a week was \$1.25. He said to me, "Why don't you buy yourself a bicycle and ride to work, and you wouldn't have to pay that \$1.25 a week." I said I didn't have enough money to buy the bicycle. He said, "I'll loan you the money to buy the bicycle, but there is a catch. You pay me back each week the amount you pay to ride the streetcar. But then after you pay me off, you have to save that amount of money. Otherwise you will just add it to your expenses. You will start eating steak instead of hamburger, but you won't get any benefit from the savings."

One day he said to me, "You know, you drive me around town. You should have a chauffeur's suit." I said, "OK, you can buy me one." He said, "I can't afford it." So I said, "If you can't afford it, how the hell do you think I can afford it?" So he said, "I guess you don't need it."

One day I said I thought I was worth more than the \$10 a week he was paying me. He said he wouldn't pay me any more, because there were other people who would gladly do the job for \$10. But he would make a deal with me. When he didn't need me to do anything for him, I could work for his tenants and keep the money they paid me. But this was only on the condition that I save the money. By the end of the year, I had saved \$500. I had more money than anyone in my family.

He told me that when he got off the boat in Galveston he had a dollar and a half in his pocket. Didn't know anybody or know a damn thing. But he saved his money and invested. He had property in downtown Houston. There was a clothing store named Stein's that was moving into Houston and wanted a new building. They contracted with someone who built a building next door to Cohen's building. A foot of the Stein building was on Cohen's property. When Cohen discovered this, he got in touch with the people. They said, "Well, the building is built now. What we will do is purchase the foot of your property, a hundred feet deep. What do you want for that property?" Cohen gave them his figure. They said it wasn't worth that. He said, "OK, you will have to chip off a foot of that damn building, a hundred feet deep. I think that will cost you a hell of a lot more than I have asked for." They paid.

In those days, it cost 35 cents to get a shave at a barbershop. Mr. and Mrs. Cohen had no children, but Mrs. Cohen's sister had two kids. When Cohen shaved himself, he would put 35 cents in one of two little "book banks," one for each of the children. The key was at the bank, where they would unlock it. The idea was that you would put the money in your savings account. One of my jobs was to take those book banks downtown to deposit the money in educational accounts for the two youngsters.

I worked for Cohen for over a year, and he and I got fairly friendly. He said, "I know that things are opening up in various places, and you will probably go to one of those jobs. But if you would stay here, I would teach you to be a wealthy man." I thought that was bullshit.

That was probably late in 1940. By then the war was coming, and jobs were opening up at the railroad. My younger brother Louis had a friend named Eddie Meads, who suggested to

him that I come down to see about mail handling. It paid about 40 cents an hour. At that time, most of the mail went by rail. It came to the post office, but then for distribution it would go to the railroad depots. Different railroads handled different parts of Texas. Missouri Pacific and Southern Pacific both came to the big cities, but only one went to many of the smaller towns. I worked for the Missouri Pacific, sorting bags of mail and packages about a block from the station. They also had little post offices on the trains.

Family Man in California

Two of my mother's sisters and their husbands had moved to Oakland in the mid-1920s, when Southern Pacific was expanding on the west coast and laying track. There was a lot of work then laying track and unloading rails and crossties.

The older sister, Edna Nebblett, had two girls and a boy. The two girls, Almeda and Ophelia, are deceased, but their children still live in Oakland. Donald, Almeda's only child, has a son himself. Diana Strange, Ophelia's only child, is close to Nell in age. Edna's boy, Norman, is also still alive, but he had no children. These are our Oakland cousins now.

The younger sister, Emmaline Clark, had three boys. The younger two were twins. They are now all deceased. But in the early 40s, I communicated a lot with Aunt Emmaline and the twins, especially Clarence Clark. He wrote and said, "How are things in Texas? How much money are you making?" He said, "You could earn at least \$1.25 an hour. Why don't you come?" The depression had eased but you still weren't making very much money in Texas. I might have been making about 40 cents an hour. So Oakland looked pretty interesting.

We moved to Oakland in the fall of 1942, when Nell was ten weeks old. I went by myself first. I got a job in the Oakland shipyard, rented a room, and looked around for housing for the family. Housing was very tight, but as soon as a landlord promised me an apartment, I let Dona know to come. She took the two kids and set out, but the offer of housing fell through while they were on the train. When they arrived with no place to live, my Aunt Emmaline let us spend some time with her. She was in a very small apartment, where she lived with her two grandchildren. Obviously that did not work very well. I think Dona and the kids went back to Texas until I could really nail down an apartment.

My job was in the repair yard in the Oakland estuary, in ship rigging. They were working twenty-four hours a day in those years. Most of my time was in the graveyard shift, from 12 at night to 8 in the morning. The job was to help bring in the equipment to be installed in ships. Some of the ships were new; some were just being refitted or repaired. A wench would lower the equipment onto the ship, but then you had to push it or move it to the right place. Sometimes you could just push it while the wench was lowering it; sometimes you had to jack it up to get a roller cart under it. I did that kind of work from the time we came in 1942 until the end of the war in 1945.

When we first went to Oakland, we joined the Beth Eden Baptist Church. But we were never really active.

Frank Jr.

Frank Jr. was born March 2, 1938. I remember how enjoyable it was to visit my mother and father with him. My mother had two granddaughters by her previous marriage, but Frank Jr. was my father's first grandchild. He just adored Frank Jr. He called him "Juggy," because he loved him as much as his white lightning. This became his family nickname.

When we came to California, Frank Jr. and I used to do a lot of the food shopping together. One of his great ambitions was for us to purchase a neighborhood market. He wanted to be the cashier.

Frank Jr. died in 1943, during a tonsillectomy at Herrick Hospital in Berkeley. He had an enlarged thymus gland, and in those days, they did not check for that before a tonsillectomy. That was the toughest time I can remember. He and I going to the hospital together for a simple operation, and my coming back without him. That was devastating.

Dona and Nell and I all went back to Houston by railroad to have a funeral. We saw the whole family then.

Lab Work

In 1942, after finding work in Oakland, I signed up for a lab technician course in a private school. I think the course lasted for about a year and a half. I didn't have any trouble paying for it. We had a lot more money from my wages in Oakland than we were accustomed to having in Texas, and I was never a big spender.

A fellow worker, a white man, may have told me about the course. When I registered, the instructor told me that they were placing all their students, but he added that he could not guarantee me a job, because industry was not hiring Negroes for that line of work. I don't remember whether there were any other African-American students in the class.

I still have the leather bound notebook that I used for taking notes in that course. It was already used when I bought it. It has a pocket on the inside of the cover, and we use the pocket for our household money.

I liked lab work. Growing cultures and examining them under the microscope fascinated me. And although industry was not hiring Negroes, it was possible to get work with the government. My first lab job was in the public health department in Vallejo, where we moved in late 1943 or early 1944, after Frank Jr. died. We moved to Vallejo mainly because of the housing. They had new apartments for workers there. The buildings were shaped like boxes, with a two-bedroom apartment on each end. This was the first time Nell could have a room of her own. I worked two jobs there. One was a full-time midnight shift at the navy yard at Mare Island, just outside of Vallejo. The other was a part-time lab job for the public health clinic in Vallejo.

Vallejo was full of newly arrived people, and a lot of things were happening there. There was a lot of prostitution, and the public health clinic had a lot of exams to do. I found the work

fascinating. Most of the samples came out positive, and it was interesting that you could identify the diseases. The people at the health department were friendly. A black person was not completely on an even keel with a white person, but it was a tad better than the shipyards, where you would often have rigging gangs that were all black or all white. I can't remember for sure, but I was probably the only African American in the lab.

It was while we were living in Vallejo, in late 1944 or early 1945, that we bought our first automobile, a 1936 Ford coupe. I bought it from a public health nurse who was volunteering for the service. I remember that it had a three-foot space behind the front seat, covered by a board. I took the board out and bought a seat to put there. After the war we would take weekend trips with that car. We would lay out a bed for Nell to sleep on and set out on Friday night for one of the state or federal parks.

The Draft

Back in 1935, when I enrolled in Houston College for Negroes, I actually had wanted to go to Howard University. My parents had some money set aside to send me to college, but it was not enough for Howard. It occurred to me that I could save some money for college if I joined the Navy. I would have food and board there, and I could save the money they gave a sailor-\$50 a month. My friend named Joel Sayles was not so interested in going to college, but he thought he would be interested in going into the Navy with me. So we went to the post office in downtown Houston. They had a sign in front of the building: Uncle Sam wants you!! So we went up to the recruiting office on the second floor. The guy there said, "What do you boys want?" "We want to join the Navy?" He just started laughing. "What?" "We want to join the Navy." He kept laughing, and then he yelled to a friend down the hall, "Hey come see these n - s who want to join the Navy." Then he got serious: "We don't want any n - s in the Navy." I said, "You will want us to fight one of these days, and then we won't do it." "He said, "Well, we will put your ass in jail." I said, "I don't give a damn what you do, I'm not going to fight." I don't think I was ever as mad before then or since.

At that time, I did not know anyone from Houston who had gone into the Navy. But I since that time, I have had at least one African-American friend from Texas who had joined the Navy early on. Eugene Tarrant, from Fort Worth, joined the Navy in the 1930s. Eugene Adams, from a small town outside Houston, is another friend who was in the Navy, but he may have joined after the war started.

When we moved to Oakland from Texas, my draft classification had been 3A, the classification that excused you from service because you had a family. But then in 1943 they dropped the exemption for family, and my draft board in Texas reclassified me 1A. I was told that I would be called up for the service in three weeks.

By that time, I had long ago before decided I didn't want to be in the service. So I went back to Houston to appear before the draft board. The person you appeared before was actually the secretary, the woman who ran the thing. She was white, of course, like the board. I had a friendly talk with her. I explained that I was working in the shipyards and was still in school, studying laboratory work. She asked how long it would take me to finish, and I said it would probably take a year and a half or two years. She asked why I had gone to California in the first

place. I said it was because I wanted to take the course in laboratory work, which was not available in Texas. So, she asked, if you are granted enough time to finish what you want to study, then what is going to happen? I said I would come back to Texas. Why, she asked? Because I wanted to see what I could do to open this avenue of study up to people of color in Texas. She said that sounded good. She would put my record in the back of the file, and when I finished my study I should let her know.

I didn't call up the draft-board secretary when I finished my lab course, but I did have to keep the board informed of where I was working. I could have worked full-time in the public health department in Vallejo, but I worked full-time in the shipyards instead because the shipyards had higher priority as war work.

Moving to Berkeley

When the war ended, they shut everything down in Vallejo, and so I lost both jobs. Then I got a job at Cutter Labs in Berkeley. They were working full throttle manufacturing penicillin - three shifts, twenty-four hours a day. There was a real mixture of people at Cutter - many races and cultures.

For a few months, I commuted to Berkeley. Then, in 1946 or 1947, a housing development in Berkeley called Cordones Village opened up. This was a development built by the government, I think, on land owned by the University of California. In any case, the housing was for people working in shipbuilding and other wartime industries. After the war was over and the shipyards and other enterprises shut down, a lot of people left the area, and the university took the property back and used it for university housing.

A year or two after we moved to Berkeley, Cutter moved their penicillin unit to North Carolina, and I was one of the raft of employees laid off. So I took about a month off from work. When I decided to go back to work, I looked for another lab job, and there weren't any around.

My cousin Clarence asked me where I was working, and I told him I wasn't working. He said, well, I don't know if you want to do it or not, but I can get you a job with the firm I'm working with. That was a construction company. McGuire & Heston. They laid pipe and drainage tiles. You had to join the labor union. I joined the union, and Clarence spoke to his foreman, who said yes, he could use another man. So I went to work digging ditches, putting in foundations, handling a lot of cement.

About that time, I ran on to a fellow I used to work with at Cutter Labs. We exchanged pleasantries. He said he was not working. I said I was working for McGuire & Heston. He said he would rather not have a job than do that kind of job. I said I had a family to take care of and was no respecter of jobs. I worked for McGuire & Heston several months, less than a year, I think. Then, in 1948, I got another lab job, with the Food and Drug Lab of the California Department of Public Health. I worked there until 1953.

In 1947 or 1948, when Nell was five and we were living in Berkeley, a fellow I knew named Paul bought a new Chevrolet. He was from Mississippi. He said he wanted to drive back to his hometown. "How about coming back with me and helping me drive? I can leave you in

Texas on the way and pick you up on the way back.” So this is what we did. Nell came along.

Back to Oakland

In 1949, at the Food and Drug Lab, another employee, Mary Williams, asked me where I lived, and I said that we lived in Cordonices Village. She said that her mother, a retired school teacher named Mrs. Theriot, had just purchased a four-unit building in Oakland on 34th Street, a couple of houses from Telegraph Avenue. Mrs. Theriot planned to occupy one of the apartments herself, and she was renting two of the other apartments to other members of the family, one to her brother and one to her oldest son. If we wanted, we could rent the fourth one. That moved us from Berkeley to Oakland. We stayed on 34th Street from 1949 to 1952, when we bought our own house on 61st Street.

In 1960, we decided we could afford to move up, and we traded the house on 61st Street for a beautiful little house up in the hills, in Montclair.

Nell

I always thought a lot of Nell. Dona and I focused on her. We had decided that our efforts would go towards making life easy and welcome for her. We went very few places where she was not welcome. It was a household of three. She knew how much money came into the house, and how much went out. We considered her wishes and desires as much as our own. The idea was that this was just as much her house as the house of her parents. We thought that was very important. I think she knew that she was well loved, and that we had her interests and well being at heart.

Both Dona and I read to Nell. I remember once when someone was reading to her and got things mixed up, and she straightened us out about what it really said. I took care of the physical things, like teaching her how to ride a bicycle. I couldn't teach her to skate, because I didn't know how.

I don't know how Nell happened to get interested in horses, but in the early 1950s, when we were living on 61st Street in North Oakland, she and I used to go to El Sobrante, about 15 miles north of Berkeley, where we would rent horses and ride together. It cost \$1.50 an hour. Sometimes we would take some of her friends along. Dona never did come with us. Nell wanted to buy a horse, but we figured that it was less expensive and less trouble to rent them.

At some church in Berkeley, I happened to go listen to a charismatic young Methodist Episcopal preacher named Roy Nichols. He was the pastor at Downs in Oakland, and I decided to go there to hear him again. About then, Downs had some vacant land, and they wanted to build a church. So they had a brick mason and a carpenter and plumber who helped build the church. The construction company was responsible for meeting the building code, and they were paid for that, but the church member contractors would come check their work before the city of Oakland's building inspectors came. I got involved by working on the roofing. Some of the church members I met were Curtis Bowers, Gene Tarant, and Lyn Williams. We would work on Saturdays and some in the evening.

We became good friends. I remember going over to Curtis's house all day on Saturday and in the evenings digging ditches for sanitation and water and gas. I remember we had electric lights. Another time, Curtis and I helped his brother-in-law to help him jack up his house and put an apartment under it, so he could rent it out. We didn't expect any pay then either. I think there is much less of that kind of thing going on now.

The Berkeley Chemistry Department

In 1953, a fellow I worked with in the Food and Drug Lab told me about a couple of friends who wanted to open their own chemical lab to manufacture thallic acid, which was used as a base for paints at that time. The Germans, who were getting their industry back on its feet at that time, were buying a lot of thallic acid. I was earning about 500 dollars a month or so at the Food and Drug Lab, and these guys offered me 200 dollars a month more to go to work in their private lab. So I went to work for them. I worked with them until about 1956, when they shut down.

At the time the private lab shut down, Downs Methodist Church was putting up a new building. They were able to get a general contractor who would allow the church to contribute workers. So we had a stonemason who belonged to the church doing some of the work, and a contractor who belonged to the church managing some of the other work. We worked on the building in the evenings when it was still light. We did a lot of work on Saturdays, even some on Sundays, I think. While we were roofing the sanctuary, one of the fellows asked me where I was working, and I told him I didn't have a job. The place where I had been working had shut down, and I was taking a few weeks off. He said, if you would like to go to work immediately, there might be an opening where I work, at the University of California Chemistry Department. So I arranged to meet with him on Monday. He took me to the business manager. I went to work right that very day.

The job at the Chemistry Department was the third job I had with the State of California. The first one was with the public health lab in Vallejo, and the second was with the Food and Drug Lab in Berkeley. When I left the Vallejo job, I took out the money I had accumulated in the state retirement fund, but when I took the Food and Drug Lab job, I put it back in. When I left the Food and Drug Lab job, I again withdrew my money, and when I went to work in the Chemistry Department, I again put it back in. So I started the job with some money already in the retirement fund.

It was after I started working for the Chemistry Department that I finally got serious about saving money. It occurred to me that when I had been making pennies in Houston we had saved a lot of it, and now that I was making a lot of money, we couldn't save any. So I went to the credit union and borrowed a \$1,000 to put in a savings account. Then I paid back the debt in installments, so that I was saving money. Dona and my friend Josh thought I was crazy. Another friend, Curtis Bowers, said the same thing. But that was the start of my real savings plan.

The first few years, there was a strict racial line in the Chemistry Department, but things loosened up in the early 60s. There was a lot of ferment. In Oakland, we were part of a group called the African-American Association. It met in our church, the Downs Methodist Church in

Oakland, and Dona and I participated. Most of the others were undergraduates, and we were very proud to be part of such a young group. It was a very intellectual group in the beginning, but later some of the more militant young people split off to form the Black Panthers. Nell says that Ernest Allen, at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, is writing about it.

One of the professors at Berkeley, George Pimentel, wrote a high school textbook, and Nell did the illustrations. I would rate Pimentel number one among the chemistry faculty, in several ways. He was a very fair-minded person, and very respectful. Quite honest and straightforward. He grew up poor, in the Central Valley, and he did not seem have forgotten about his roots.

About 1960, students starting to come into Berkeley from all the world, including students from Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, India, and China. Somehow I got acquainted with a young fellow who went under the name Ben Kofi. He introduced me to other Ghanaian and Nigerian students. We started to invite students to our house. They would prepare their own food at the house, and we would have big dinners. I remember especially one young Arab. He cooked dinner for us one Sunday, and when he finished the kitchen was a damn mess. There was an East Indian who fixed food for us. There was also an English fellow who fixed food.

As time passed and more African students started to come to the university, I became more active with the students. In 1962, when Nell was finishing her sophomore year at Berkeley, she got interested in Crossroads Africa, a program started by an African-American minister, similar to the Peace Corps. They would send college students to work during the summer in West Africa. Nell went to Northern Nigeria. At the same time, she had been accepted as a study abroad student at Bordeaux. So she left the US, went to Northern Nigeria for the summer, and then went on to France. Then the following summer she and some other girls bought a car and traveled around Europe. I remember registering for her for the fall semester of 1963, because she was not getting back soon enough.

Glaucoma

In 1962, I was going to the doctor for dry eye, a condition where your tear ducts don't work properly. I had a Chinese woman as my ophthalmologist at Kaiser at that time. One Sunday, I read an article in the San Francisco Chronicle that gave a list of symptoms that might indicate someone had glaucoma. The symptoms looked like me. So I took them to the doctor, but she did not take me seriously. I think she considered it insulting that I thought I knew her business, and this is why she did not really consider it. She did not do a pressure test.

In the Chemistry Department, I had to wear safety glasses. They sent us over to the School of Optometry, and if you needed glasses for your vision, they would give you a new prescription, and then the safety glasses would be something you could wear all the time. When they examined me, they confirmed that I had glaucoma. They told me to call my ophthalmologist and that I should be seen immediately, that very day. When I arrived at Kaiser, the pressure was very high. The average is 16, and I had 56 in right eye and 45 in my left eye.

Ghana and After

As she was leaving Nigeria at the end of the summer of 1962, Nell wrote to us and told us we had to find some way to spend time in West Africa. I said I didn't know how we would manage that. But in the fall of 1963, a query came to Berkeley seeking a chief technician for the chemistry department at the University of Ghana in Lagon for two years. They had advertised in many countries. The query to the US landed in Berkeley, but another query went to London, another to Canada, and another to Germany. The business manager for the chemistry department saw the query and called me to ask if I was interested in spending two years at the University of Ghana as chief technician. I went up to take a look at what they were asking for. They required two years, but as I reminded the business manager, Berkeley's rule was that you could have only a one-year leave without giving up your position. He said that if I really wanted to go and they accepted me, then the department would apply to the Chancellor and get an exception. So I started to get my credentials together, including three recommendations: George Pimentel, Henry Rappaport, and Joel Hildebrand. Professor Hildebrand was retired but still doing research, and he was recognized as the father of inorganic chemistry at Berkeley.

When the application reached Ghana, the people working there included some Englishmen, some East Indians, and a visitor from Shell Oil. When they sat down to look over the applications, the Shell guy was really impressed by the people writing my recommendations. Joel Hildebrand was a big name, and the Shell guy thought I must really be good if Rappaport said so, because Rappaport wouldn't recommend his mother if he didn't think she was good. So they selected me.

When they invited me, in the late fall of 1963, Nell was a senior. She was sharing an apartment in Berkeley, walking distance from campus. We sold our car and leased our house. My friend Gene Tarrant took responsibility for our affairs - collected the rent from our tenants and even picked up prescriptions for us. Just now, after 40 years, I am returning them a favor by taking them shopping, because Gene can no longer drive.

Getting visas to enter Ghana was one hell of a job. We thought we could get them very easily. So on our way to Ghana, we flew into Philadelphia and stayed with Dona's brother Ewart in Bristol. Then we went to the consulate in New York to get the visas. The first day they said they would have it ready the next day. This happened a couple of times, and then I said if it was not ready the third time, the job could go to hell. The third time we got it.

We flew to London and then to Accra. We landed at night, and two members of the chemistry department met us and took us to something equivalent to a motel. We stayed overnight, and then our two hosts came early and took us to breakfast. Then they took us for a tour of Lagon and part of Accra. Lagon is about 8 or 10 miles from Accra. In the afternoon, we were invited to the department chairman's house for lunch.

The university rented us a car and a house. They deducted the money from my salary. For our car, we chose a Volkswagen bug. Finding a house was harder. The university had various furnished houses we could choose from. The first house we chose was big - two stories and four or five bedrooms. Dona describes trying to get up the steps in her book. She didn't like

it, so we went back and got a cottage. Later they built some new apartments, about four to a building, about a mile from campus, called Aida Valley. We got an upstairs apartment there.

Dona wanted to do her own housework. But the wife of one of the chemistry professors, who was Ghanaian, told her that she could not do that. She was in a class where people had servants. Whether she liked it not, she had to provide work for the lower classes by hiring at least two people, one to do the washing and one to clean. If she wanted to cook herself, that was OK.

I was amused that the fellow who did the laundry carried a briefcase, with a change of clothes and soap in it. The young fellow who did the cleaning was from the north. He was from the Fafa nation, north of the Volta River. I remember that a number of the high schools had a tough time getting chemicals and other supplies for their science courses. I used to order what the department needed, plus an excess so that we could sell it to the high schools and other institutions. I also built up good communication with several companies in the US, and we could get delivery from there much faster than from London. I built a good relationship with several high schools in the north. I used to go up and visit there from time to time.

Since I had been diagnosed for glaucoma, I had been taking a drug called Pilocarpin for it. It came as a liquid. I brought a big supply with me to Ghana. When it started to run out, I went to a local ophthalmologist to get more. He said he could prescribe it for me, but it was hard to get in Ghana. So I had Gene Tarrant get a whole bunch for me, and I gave the extra to the ophthalmologist for his other patients.

The fall is the rainy season in Ghana, when the temperature drops down to 70 degrees. Then you have to wear a sweater. I remember one trip north, when we spent a couple of days with a family. To have warm water for a bath, they would build a fire, put a boulder in the fire until it was red hot, and then put the boulder in water to heat the water.

Once we decided to drive over to Nigeria. From Lagon to Lagos was 300 miles. It took us 3 days, because there were at least two countries, and each country closed the borders at 6 pm. The sun rose at 6 and set at 6. This was around Christmas time. We have at home a nativity scene that was given to us by our Nigerian host, Festus Edahan, who was an artist. We also bought a piece of art from him that had been made by his grandfather.

If you bought a piece of art, you had to take it to the national museum so they could decide whether it was an antiquity and whether it could be exported. They considered the piece by Festus's grandfather an antiquity, but they gave us permission to buy it, on the understanding that the Nigerian government could recall it. We still have the tag on it identifying it as an antiquity.

We built up a friendship with Festus. I have a walking stick at home that he made for me. My friends in Ghana sent it upcountry and had it covered with Ghanaian goatskin and "medicined" so that nothing bad could happen to me as long as I carried it. When I went to China in 1968, they said you can't bring anything extra, only one bag. So I didn't bring the walking stick, and I ended up in a hospital in China from dehydration.

After our visit to Nigeria, we saw Festus in Ghana, when he was doing some stonework for the Ghanaian government. While he was in Ghana, he also did some woodwork to sell. We had a showing of it at our apartment, where he sold it all. Nell bought a piece, and he gave us a piece.

After coming back to Ghana from the Nigerian trip, we took a drive over to the Ivory Coast. We also did a fair amount of travel around Ghana. We put 20,000 miles on that Volkswagen in less than two years.

I classify that time as the best two years of my life. We were in a different culture, and we were able to operate very well in it. The University of Ghana offered me a permanent position. The reason I didn't take it was that I would have had to get special permission to send money out of Ghana. Also, we were making enough to live by Ghanaian standards, but not enough to send Nell to graduate school.

We left in September of 1965. The coup occurred in February of 1966. We didn't see that coming. Nell was still there. She was studying history at the university and reading the news in French for the Ghanaian radio. At that point, they invited the Americans who had come during Nkrumah's time to leave.

Back from Ghana

When we came back from Ghana, we had to get an automobile. One of our friends, Eugene Adams, an electronic technician in the Chemistry Department, had just purchased a new Toyota. He loaned it to us to use until we got a car of our own. He has since retired, of course. He lost his left leg in retirement. Circulation went down to zero. His wife is now ill also. She goes to dialysis. Their daughter lives with them. A month or six weeks ago the daughter got sick and had to go to the hospital, leaving the two of them to fend for themselves with no transportation. So I was taking them around until the daughter came back. She has been back from the hospital for a couple of weeks.

My job at Berkeley changed after we returned. When I first went to work at Berkeley, I had been involved directly in laboratory work, especially in setting up classroom experiments, and I met a lot of faculty members and graduate students. Around 1958 or 1959, I also started supervising the undergraduates who worked with in the laboratories. At that time there were only a handful, but the number kept increasing, and when I returned from Ghana supervising them became my full-time job. By the time I retired in 1982, I was supervising over 60 of them.

The students were always in and out of my office at 19 Lewis Hall. Some were assigned to answer the phone or complete paperwork there, and others would leave their books and papers there. Besides my own desk, I always had one or two other desks for the students to use. Sometimes there were breaks between one assignment and another, when the students would come around to chat, and I got to know many of them very well.

Depression

I think it was after I came back from Ghana that I was diagnosed for hypertension. The

internist at Kaiser who diagnosed it prescribed a drug called Reserpin. It had depression as a known side-effect, but in those days, side effects were not written on the medicine bottle, and when I look back at my experience with the ophthalmologist, I am not so sure that the internist cared that much about what the pills might do to me.

When I look back on those days, I don't see any reason except for the medicine that I should have been depressed. I was having a great time working with the students in the Chemistry Lab, and I was also enjoying a hobby of jewelry making.

I remember the depression starting in about 1970. I tried to ignore it at first, but it just got worse and worse. My appetite started to slack off, and I had a general feeling of uneasiness. I took off from work for a couple of months, because supervising the students and the employees in the lab, which I was supposed to do, became very hard for me. When the uneasy feelings came on, I would have to leave work. I felt I had lost control.

The depression came after the death in 1969 of Nathaniel Hawthorne, a good friend from high school in Houston, who became my very best friend in Oakland. He was very overweight—over 400 pounds, I think. He had to have an automobile altered in order to get into the driver's seat. He was probably only in his 40s, but I think he died of heart trouble. Before I found out what Reserpin would do to you, I thought that the depression might have been due to Nathaniel's death. But I no longer believe that.

Our high school used to have vaudeilles. Hawthorne was a good singer and a good dancer. There was a lady who used to teach music – Miss Louis; she taught PE, and she was in charge of the program and would play the piano. I remember when Nathaniel did the split and split your pants. Miss Louis, called out, “Fats, your peter's out.” Everyone called him Fats in those days.

Nathaniel was a welder in the shipyard, Moore's Drydock on 7th Street in Oakland, where I was a ship's rigger. We would both work the graveyard shift. Nathaniel went into the barbecue business after the war. He had the idea of a making a sandwich that he called “the juicy pig”. It became very popular in the Oakland area. People would go to his restaurant just for it. His mother was a friend of Dona's mother in her Baptist church.

We used to hunt together. We would pay to hunt deer on an Indian reservation up north. We never got one, but I still own the 30-86 I would hunt with. One time I was most frightened in my life – we started to crawl through a barb-wired fence, and just on the other side of the fence was a whole group of snakes. I have never cared for fishing, but I would go along to ride in the boat when Nathaniel went fishing.

The internist, who I would see regularly to have my blood pressure checked, sent me to a psychiatrist at Kaiser, who was not of any help. A family friend who is a cardiologist, Rose-Marie Lanelle later told me not to go back to that psychiatrist, because he did not have my interests at heart.

For a short time I went to a psychologist, who quickly came to the conclusion that he

could not do anything, but that I needed some kind of medication. He suggested an African-American psychiatrist in San Francisco, who I went to see a couple of times. The San Francisco psychiatrist told me that although he liked my business, it would be much more convenient for me to go to his friend in Oakland, Joe Davis. Davis was the one who brought me to the point where I could return to work. He started with medication, but that did not do what he expected, so finally he prescribed shock treatments. I remember that I had at least three. Josh Theriot took me to them and brought me home.

I think it was Joe Davis who figured out that I should not be on the Reserpin. I think he may have also recommended a different internist at Kaiser. In any case, I got a different medicine for the hypertension. That was even before the shock treatments.

The real bad depression did not last more than a year. I had sick leave and vacation that covered the time I was off in 1970. I never missed a full paycheck. I was back on my feet well enough to accumulate the vacation time that we used to go to East Africa in 1972.

The uneasiness has appeared at various times since then. I remember calling Joe Davis when it happened again in the 1980s, after I retired. He put me on Prozac for a short length of time. That seemed to work pretty well. I probably made two or three trips to see him.

Retirement

I retired on June 30, 1982. The last twenty years passed very fast for me.

When Dona left the university, she had \$2300 in a retirement fund. I persuaded her to keep it in the fund. We have been receiving pension payments from it for 23 years now, and we received more than \$2300 in just the first 5 months of 2004.

For many years, the University of California paid for our whole Kaiser plan and reimbursed us for our Medicare co-payments. They are no longer so generous; we don't get the reimbursements now for the Medicare co-payments, and we have to pay \$58 a month for the health insurance.

Celebration at 85

On the occasion of Frank Irvin's 85th birthday, several of the young people he had supervised in the chemistry laboratory at Berkeley sent their remembrances. If you would like to add your thoughts to this collection, e-mail them to gshafer@rutgers.edu.

From Keith Alexander

Brother Frank:

You shared this fine poem by Langston Hughes with me during the Summer of 1976. I think you saw that I needed to hear it at that time in my life (you were right). It has stayed with

me since - I included it in the acknowledgements section of my Ph.D. dissertation and refer to it often since that fine summer afternoon you first read this poem to me in your office in Lewis Hall. Every once in a while when I think I don't have the will to go on or go farther, I read it and it reminds me of what life is (and isn't), the importance of facing struggle through the journey and the debt we owe to so many who have preceded us.

“MOTHER TO SON” BY LANGSTON HUGHES

Well, son, I'll tell you;
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpets on the floor--
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on
And reachin' landin's
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps.
'Cause you find it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now--
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Thank you for this eternal gift and your friendship - I cherish them both.

Keith Alexander

From Sharon Chin

(on behalf of herself and her husband Stanley Huie Chin (May 18, 1940 - June 22, 1995))

Dear Frank,

It is with great pleasure that I have this opportunity to wish you a very Happy Birthday and to let you know how much I (and Stan) have valued your friendship. It was my lucky day when Stan asked me if I would like to work for you on a short term project. Meeting and working for you was balm to a young shy student not ready for the large intimidating, impersonal UCB. You were so gentle, kind and caring...not scary at all. You helped me survive the UCB experience. Thank you.

I know Stan would have wanted to wish you the very best on your birthday as well. He always had the highest regard for you! Over the years he has mentioned you often. You

influenced him profoundly. I can not tell you how much your friendship meant to him.

It seems so long ago that we worked for you...and yet it has gone by with a blink of an eye. Stan and I learned the most important lesson from you, when we were young and innocent of the world, to be good, kind and caring to all people. You were and are the epitome of kindness, gentleness and caring. You touched us both.

I don't remember specifics about my time working for you but have always remembered your smile...a smile of genuine caring and warmth...a smile that warmed my soul and still warms my soul each time I picture your smile. Thank you Frank. HAPPY 85TH BIRTHDAY!

Love, Sharon Chin

From Chester James

Things I Remember About Frank

I first met Frank more than 40 years ago, when I was a Chemical Engineering student at the University of California (Berkeley).

Most of my memories about Frank concern the things that I learned from working around him; from watching how he handled himself, and from seeing how he interacted with other people. Frank had a charming smile. But he also had a presence about him that commanded respect; and this allowed him to treat everyone with the consideration that any person wants to receive.

I remember that it made no difference whether Frank was dealing with a student or a Nobel Prize winning Professor. He always treated people with courtesy and demanded the same. His attitude was pleasant, but never one of subservience, nor one of superiority.

There are more specific incidents I remember about Frank, because in hindsight after 40+ years, I now consider them to be humorous. For example, there were times when someone, who didn't know Frank, would walk into his office. They would stand there with a dumb look on their face (thinking surely this black man can't be in charge of this sophisticated Chemistry Laboratory). But, it never took long for them to recognize that Frank was indeed the boss, because of his professional demeanor and self-assured manner.

And, of course there were the occasional screw-ups that Frank had to straighten out. He would call those of us who were working that day into his office. After explaining what had gone wrong, Frank would ask: "Now who did that?" At times, whether true or not, our response was: "It didn't happen on our shift, someone else must be responsible." Frank would give us that - "Yeah, Right" look - and say something to the effect, "I'll fix it this time, but don't let it happen again." If you honestly made a mistake, Frank always had a way of leaving you with your dignity.

Many different types of people worked for Frank, and I am certain you could not find one

who would say that Frank treated them unfairly at any time.

I would like to thank Frank for giving me a job when I really needed one and more importantly, for teaching by example how to conduct one's self when dealing with people of diverse stations and differing attitudes.

HAPPY 85TH BIRTHDAY FRANK.

The lessons I learned from you have been invaluable.

Chet James

From Stephanie Floyd Johnson

I was a student at UC Berkeley from 1973-77. My sister Ceda preceded me at Cal by two years. She was the trailblazer and I looked forward to joining her at Cal and taking my first steps toward independence.

My freshman year was filled with experiences that expanded me from both an academic and life lessons perspectives. The early seventies in Berkeley California was wonderful time to be young and a university student. The Civil Rights Movement, which peaked in the 1960s, had pushed open the doors of colleges, universities, and corporate America, providing opportunities for African Americans, Mexican Americans and others that had been shut out because of their ethnicity. Affirmative action and hard work helped us prepare for the careers and professions that we have today.

Ceda and I were both awarded College Opportunity Grants that paid all major expenses such as tuition, room, and board. However, even with financial assistance there were expenses that needed to be covered. Our mother, Nellie Neal, who was employed as a receptionist at Kaiser Hospital in Oakland, met Mr. Frank Irvin, who was a member of Kaiser. In their conversation over the telephone, she learned that Mr. Irvin worked at Cal and was responsible for hiring students for "work-study" positions. She told Mr. Irvin that she had a daughter at Cal that needed a job and he told her to have Ceda contact him. Needless to say, Ceda did call Mr. Irvin and the rest is history. When I joined my sister at Cal, I too called Mr. Irvin and he hired me to work in the Chemistry Department.

Mr. Irvin was like a "Moses" guiding us young students through the valleys and mountains of the university systems. He walked around the campus with his walking stick, like Moses walked with his staff leading his people to the promised land. Mr. Irvin gave us access to employment that helped to sustain us through college. He checked on us often to make sure that we stayed on course and graduated from one of the most prestigious universities in the country. One must remember that even with Affirmative Action there were many obstacles to employment for African Americans during this period. Mr. Irvin had faith in us and he was willing to risk his career and professional reputation to keep us employed. He is one of those unknown heroes who was responsible for the success we enjoy today. For this I shall be forever grateful. I consider myself fortunate and honored to know such a kind and generous spirit as Mr. Frank Irvin.

From Steven Mar

I remember when Frank was biking in Oakland, going out to Hayward with his brown beret hat - 15 miles was a short ride. Also I remember when he went to live in Africa. Both of you were gone about 3-4 years. I was told this by Josh. Frank definitely was adventurous.

Yours, Steven Mar

From Michael W. Murphy

When I first met Mr. E.:

I met Mr. E. in June of 1972, when I interviewed for a Lab Helper position at U. C. Berkeley. There was a strike at the time so he hired me in August of 1972. I was 21 years old, married and had a 2 year old son. I am still employed at U. C. Berkeley, Chemistry Dept. as a supervisor. I am also still married, our son is 32 years old, and we have 2 beautiful grandchildren.

How many years I've known him?

I have know him for 31 years.

My most memorable moment:

When we trained for the Brass Pole 10K run and ran it together, approximately 25 years ago.

A lesson learned from Mr. E.:

The importance of saving and investing my money wisely while I was young.

Advice given by Mr. E. that turned out true. [A statement of wisdom]

Mr. E. read a poem by Langston Hughes called "Mother to Son". I will never forget the powerfulness and the lifelong message that this poem depicts.

Slogan from Mr. E.:

All of his slogans death with money! [Smile]

What Mr. E. has brought to my life?

- a. Love, caring, compassion and understanding.
- b. A strong positive black male role model.
- c. He's shown me how to live a healthy and zestful life.

What I will always remember about Mr. E.:

I will remember his zest for life and true concern for humanity. He is a truly wonderful person whom I honor with utmost respect.

From Ellis Rankin

As I look back to that time in 1979-80 when I worked with Mr. Irvin in the Chemistry department at UC Berkeley, what struck me first (and quite surprisingly) was the fact that I worked with him for what really was a brief period of time - maybe one summer, and a school quarter or two at most! Reflecting back to that time, what I remember most vividly was Mr. Irvin's extremely pleasant demeanor, smiling face, and bright "happy" eyes. Those close to him in the department would refer to him as Mr. E, E, Brother Frank, or just Frank. I always felt most comfortable addressing him as Mr. Irvin, and continue to do so.

He could often be seen throughout the department, exuding his warmth in his interactions with faculty and staff. It would not be uncommon to see him with his pipe clenched in his teeth and a walking stick in his hand.

What I knew about Mr. Irvin at the time was that he was married, had a daughter doing well in North Carolina, health-conscious (fasting regularly to cleanse his body), and seemed to love all things African. That really was about it. To be honest, as I see it, there was nothing really extraordinary in our working relationship and interactions together.

That brings me to the present and what I now feel about our relationship. In looking at the whole picture - from the first day working with him up to today - all I can think to myself is "Why me?"

I already mentioned how brief that time we worked together seemed to me. I can only imagine (or at least I thought I could) how much less significant that time must have seemed to him with him being almost twice my age. I think about all of the things he must have experienced up to this point in his life. I then think about the large circle of meaningful people in his life; and again "Why me?"

In concluding this and completing the assignment Mrs. Irvin had given me of documenting my significant memories of the time I spent working with Mr. Irvin, I have come to realize that the most significant time to me has been the period since his retirement from the university (over twenty years ago?!). The reason being that in spite of the time passing, and communication between us being holiday cards mailed to each other, or the even rarer phone conversation - with all that (which is actually very little), I truly feel special and honored to be thought of and considered worthy enough to be invited to the different events - anniversary dinners, birthday celebrations, and the like.

As mentioned earlier, with all the significant people in his life - political figures, community and civic leaders, and close family and friends, in addition to student workers who probably worked with Mr. Irvin a lot longer than I did - being amongst those who do get considered and invited to these glorious events, not only do I feel special, but I also know that I am so in Mr. Irvin's life; and for that I truly am honored.

From Tim Upshaw

I worked for Frank at the UC Chemistry department during the school years 1976 and 1977.

I graduated from San Jose State in 1981 with a B.S. degree in Electrical Engineering. My first job out of college was with Hughes Aircraft Company, which is now called Raytheon Corp., located in Southern California. I worked there for 3 years as a member of the technical engineering staff. This is where I met my wife and soulmate Mary.

After receiving a job offer from Lockheed Martin in Sunnyvale in 1984, we moved back to the Bay Area. Working as a Systems Engineer and a Systems Test Engineer allowed for a variety of interesting projects and programs, ranging from submarine launched missiles and communications satellites to a “Star Wars” program which will protect our continent.

I’ve been active with the MESA program acting as an Industry Advisory Board Member representing Lockheed Martin. MESA stands for Math, Engineering, Science Achievement; it is a middle school and high school program to help the students achieve the highest levels of scholastic excellence. I am a product of MESA, which started at my old high school, Oakland Technical.

Currently, I’m tutoring students in math and science subjects in a San Jose program called “Career Choices and Possibilities”. This program is open to students from the 3rd grade to high school and is designed to increase academic readiness and performance to build, develop, and enhance their life skills.

From Theodosia Valrey

Frank

For the many years that you have guided students such as I, we thank you.

I remember you so vividly as if I was still a student. I remember your dashiki and wooden cane walking around campus as if the world was yours. And you know what? It was!

A lot of what I do today was because I had a teacher such as you to guide me.

Many more Birthdays, Frank! Theodosia “Doty” Valrey