



Boyhood Days in the Owens Valley 1890-1908

Beyond the High Sierra and near the Nevada line lies Inyo County, California—big, wild, beautiful, and lonely. In its center stretches the Owens River Valley, surrounded by the granite walls of the Sierra Nevada to the west and the White Mountains to the east. Here the remote town of Bishop hugs the slopes of towering Mount Tom, 13,652 feet high, and here I was born on January 6, 1890. When I went to college, I discovered that most Californians did not know where Bishop was, and I had to draw them a map.

My birthplace should have been Candelaria, Nevada, for that was where my parents were living in 1890. My father was an engineer in the Northern Belle silver mine. I was often asked, "Then how come you were born in Bishop?" and I replied, "Because my mother was there." The truth was that after losing a child at birth the year before, she felt Candelaria's medical care was not to be trusted.

The decline in the price of silver, the subsequent depression, and the playing out of the mines in Candelaria forced the Albright family to move to Bishop permanently.

We had a good life in Bishop. I loved it, was inspired by its aura, and always drew strength and serenity from it. I have no recollection of ever having any bad times. There weren't many special things to do, but whatever we did, it was on horseback or afoot. Long hours were spent in

school. We had only one elementary school and one high school, the only one in Inyo County, which was as big as the state of Massachusetts.

We didn't think we were poor, didn't know we were poor, but we certainly were. Bishop had no autos, no power, no lights, no sewers, and no water systems, but we never missed them because we never had them. I don't remember anybody complaining about it either. They were good people, and nothing really bad happened. We never locked doors, and I don't remember any stealing. Once in a while we had a killing, but somehow I don't recall who was killed—or why!

My parents were very different people. My dad, an immigrant from Canada in 1873, had only completed a sixth-grade education before he was apprenticed to a cabinet maker. He later utilized his talents as a millwright and an engineer in mines from the Comstock Lode to Aurora to Candelaria. In Bishop he bought a mill and put up his sign, which read: "Contractor—Builder—Planing & Feed—Undertaker. "He made it plain he was not a mortician. "All I do is make a coffin, get the body as soon as I can, and bury it." He had learned this trade in Candelaria, where he and Chris Zabriskie, the local Wells-Fargo man, had operated an undertaking business on the side, which advertised: "A to Z—Albright to Zabriskie. You kick the bucket. We do the rest."

My mother, Mary Marden Albright, was something different. She was born in Mokelumne Hill and had been honed in tough times in the rough mining camps of California and Nevada. However, she was a rare woman of that period. She had gone to college in Napa.

My mother ran the family with an iron hand. After her three sons spent long hours in school, there were chores around the house and tough physical work outdoors, washing windows and dishes, scrubbing floors, beating carpets, chopping wood, and doing the gardening. Every other waking minute was devoted to education and learning. And because my father was such a gentle, kindly man, she felt she had to be more aggressive.

My dad was a very popular man in town because of his involvement in local activities and his endearing personality. He was a quiet fellow, very gentle, very, very friendly, and awfully hard working. He was a handsome man, fairly tall, always lean but muscular. He had a mustache but was getting bald at an early age.

Besides working hard from dawn to dark, Dad belonged to every society and lodge in town and conducted most of the rituals at them because of his unusual memory. My mother used to say to him, "You belong to so many lodges you never lodge at home."

My parents were bent on education for their children. Both had phenomenal memories. Because they realized the value of this extraordinary gift, they trained their children. While we were waiting to have breakfast, Mother made us recite poetry. My brother Leslie and I used Sundays (when we were forbidden to indulge in nonreligious activities) to play a game. One would start reciting some poetry or work of an author and keep going until he ran out or made a mistake. The other picked up at that point. I don't remember if there was a reward or penalty attached to the winner or loser. It was a great game, and we could recite whole sections of *Idylls of the King* or cantos of Virgil's *Aeneid*—in Latin!

Mother started us on "the classics" at an early age. It was my twelfth birthday when she gave me *David Copperfield* and soon afterward the James Fenimore Cooper books and the books by the English author G. A. Henty. Each Henty book had a boy hero who participated in nearly every historical era, including crossing the Alps with Hannibal or campaigning with Clive in India. When I was about thirteen, my parents probably went into debt to buy the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* from the Sears & Roebuck catalogue. What a feast of reading that was!

We enjoyed music in our home. My mother played the small organ we had in the living room and had us sing along with her. She also encouraged her boys to try musical instruments, but Dewey and I were hopelessly tone deaf. Leslie was musically gifted, teaching himself the piano, organ, and most stringed instruments. He was especially fine with the mandolin.

One more item about that organ. There were no banks in Bishop in those days. Our family "banked" in an old stocking that, when filled with the Albright savings, was tied tight and hidden in the organ through the foot pedal.

One thing we missed was a phonograph, but there was no money for it. Happily, we lived next door to a widow who had one and was pretty deaf. When her phonograph was playing, you could hear it all over town.

My father did not go to church. He said he had been reared in the Church of England and heartily disliked ritual. Sunday was his only day of rest, so he stayed home, reading his *San Francisco Chronicle* or *Argosy Magazine*. My mother, however, attended the Methodist Church, until the Presbyterian Church was built around 1900. She insisted her boys go to Sunday school, starting at age five. Our teachers gave out cards every Sunday with a biblical picture and quotation on it. My mother made us

memorize these, and then we had to recite them by the month of the year.

In the summers, most boys who were old enough worked in the hay fields, as this was farming country before the water rights were bought up by the city of Los Angeles. Before I was old enough to do this, I made many outings in the Sierras. When I was ten years old, I went with some relatives and friends up to Ten Big Trees camping area and the old ghost town of Pine City, in the shadow of Mount Humphreys. Here the crumbling houses built around 1870 had walls papered with old newspapers. Brother Leslie and I loved reading "history" off them.

The next year, my dad took me camping to Twin Lakes along with two other men and a boy my age named Billy. When Billy and I set off to fish on the lake, the boat proved to have holes in it and nearly sank. Fortunately, we made it back to shore. I couldn't swim then and, though afraid of water ever after, never did learn to swim.

While up near Mammoth Lake, we met Robert L. P. Bigelow, a ranger for the old General Land Office in the Sierra Forest Reserve, which extended south from Yosemite Valley to the Tehachapi. There was, as yet, no United States Forest Service. In 1904 Bigelow took me along when he made his inspection trip north into Yosemite National Park. We went through Mono Pass and Bloody Canyon into Tuolumne Meadows, but never reached, or even saw from above, the Yosemite Valley. We saw the beauty of the Minaret-Devils Postpile region, an area that was removed a year later from the park. I never forgot that and tried all my life to get the lands restored to Yosemite.

We camped at Red Meadows, near Devils Postpile, with U.S. cavalrymen detailed to protect Yosemite Park from trespass by sheepherders and their flocks. They had just put fifty to seventy-five miles between some shepherds and their sheep. I remember noting some objects high in the pine trees. I asked what they were and was told they were sheep that had been "dressed out" in sacks and hoisted high in the trees to keep the meat cool and fresh. The sergeant said he thought they had enough sheep meat to last the rest of the summer.

Perhaps more than to either of my parents, I looked to my maternal grandfather, Horace Marden, as a model. He was born in Maine in 1832. Like thousands of others, he set off to find gold. He crossed the Isthmus of Nicaragua and arrived in California before his twentieth birthday.

Finding business more profitable than mining, he engaged in the freighting business throughout California's Mother Lode and the mining country of Nevada.

For nearly forty years, he retained his transportation business while operating stamp mills in Aurora and Bodie. He served in the Nevada Legislature and saw six of his nine children die. At last he pulled up stakes in Nevada and entered the logging business in northern California. I spent several summers working at his camps, where we had long talks, and he transferred his strength, courage, and philosophy to me. This, in turn, shaped my ideals and determination to reach the high goals he had set for himself.

Granddad Marden was a rugged old character. As we drove along together in the mountains of northern California, we would discuss the affairs of the time or he'd tell me about the old days of the gold rush and life in the mining camps. We'd talk about the forest—the magnificent stands of timber clothing the slopes of Mount Shasta. It bothered him that these beautiful places were being so ruthlessly destroyed, and yet people like himself had to make a living from doing it. I especially remember our emergence from the Sacramento Canyon to see the astonishing view of Mount Shasta. Its majesty swept the whole horizon. We stopped and just silently absorbed its beauty.

Large areas of these woodlands had been cleared of commercial timber, and there had been some destructive fires that swept over the slashings and young trees and shrubs. As we stood there and looked at the old cut-over areas, my granddad again talked of the wasteful destruction of the timberlands. He regretted that nothing seemed to be done about it, although it was apparent from his conversation that he was familiar with new government publications regarding forests and the ideas of Gifford Pinchot. As young as I was, I believe I got my first feeling for conservation from this trip with my old granddad.

In 1903, when I left Bishop and saw the outside world for the first time, I not only went to visit Granddad Marden, but later joined my mother and brothers for a tour of San Francisco. Although most of the city was a mass of ramshackle wooden shacks, the heart of it was truly impressive. Later I thought how lucky we were to have seen San Francisco before its destruction in 1906.

The first thing my mother did in San Francisco was to take her three sons to a barbershop. The barber circled me and, completing his study, said, "My boy, where did you get your last haircut? You haven't two hairs on your head the same length."

I replied, "Mears Creek with horse clippers."

One morning Mother read that the army transport *Sherman* would sail for the Philippines the next day right after noon. She decided to take us to the dock to see her sail. We were disappointed with the soldiers,

who wore dungarees instead of blue uniforms with brass buttons. Some regiments did appear, one of which was a colored regiment. It was most impressive, as we had never seen black people.

Then more soldiers arrived. Among these were two outstanding officers in blue uniforms with maroon stripes down the legs of their trousers. They were tall and handsome, straight as a ship's mast, walking in perfect cadence to board the *Sherman*. I found out the next day when their pictures appeared in the newspaper that they were Lieutenant Douglas MacArthur and Lieutenant U. S. Grant III, just out of West Point and on their first assignment as officers to the Philippines. I determined then and there that I would be an officer in the army.

I was excited about the possibilities of army life from reading books and from recollections of the Spanish-American War, especially the exploits of Colonel Theodore Roosevelt and his Rough Riders. I decided I wanted to go to West Point, and for the next three years I bedeviled our congressman, Sylvester Clark Smith of Bakersfield, for an appointment. Finally, in 1906, he gave me an appointment as first alternate, which meant that, if I passed the examinations and the principal failed or for some other reason did not want to go to West Point, I would go.

Actually, I had a problem. Bishop High School was not accredited at this time. After I finished two years there, Mother decided I should go to high school in Stockton, where I could live with an old friend of hers from Aurora. In April 1907 my appointment as first alternate candidate for a West Point cadetship came through. This meant that I had to take the examinations for the academy at the Presidio in San Francisco. Shortly thereafter I took the night boat from Stockton down to the Bay City to face the tests.

In the morning I was shocked to see the panorama of ruins from the earthquake and fire of 1906. I had the bad luck to arrive in town just as a streetcar strike began, and my cheap old hotel was four miles from the Presidio, a long walk to the army fort and back every day to take the exams. From May 1 through May 5, 1907, I was examined, mentally and physically, by a board of army officers. I passed the physical exam and all of the academic tests (geometry only conditionally). It didn't make any difference, however, because I was only the first alternate. The principal appointee passed everything and took his place at West Point in the summer.

Realizing that West Point was probably a remote chance, my mother had urged me to take a look at the University of California at Berkeley as long as I was in the vicinity. I did this and was overwhelmed by the

beauty of the campus and by its buildings and history. I immediately decided that I'd like to attend this college if my West Point appointment fell through.

In 1908, I finished high school in Bishop and was admitted to the University of California for the fall semester. Because my high school was still not accredited, I was placed, on probation until I passed my first-semester freshman exams. I worked my summer job until the last day before I left for Berkeley. I needed every cent I could earn, as my family could not afford to pay my way at college.

The last rays of sun were disappearing behind Old Tom, casting a glow across my beloved mountains. Inwardly, I was somewhat sad to leave this beautiful, serene valley, but I realized how lucky and how happy my life had been in this little Sierra town. Paradoxically, my youth and eagerness to experience life outside this sheltered existence sent a tingle of anticipation through me as I hurried home. I always remembered that last lovely day as a resident of Bishop, Inyo County, California. I never again came home except as a visitor.