

FILIAL VIGNETTES



in memory of my father

by jim kepner



Published by the
Intl. Gay & Lesbian Archives
P O Box 38100
Hollywood, CA 90038.
(213)854-0271

Copyright 1990.

These vignettes
written roughly
as they happened
are part of a series:

135 Vignettes:
A Suite for Lovers, Tricks,
Fascinations & Near Misses.

(The number of vignettes
in the collection
will probably increase)

my father about 1932

Jim Kepner was found under an Oleander bush in Galveston, Texas, in 1923. After abandoning his plans to be a Presbyterian missionary to the Belgian Congo (now Zaire), he transited through pacifism, atheism, science fiction fandom and the communist party, while earning a precarious living as a telegraph messenger, a law clerk, a soda jerk, a warehouseman, a taxi driver, etc. Since 1953, he has been a gay activist, journalist, historian, teacher and founder/curator of the International Gay & Lesbian Archives, now located at 626 North Robinson Blvd in West Hollywood.

THE CITY SECRETARY'S SON

Catholic Al Smith's
Race for President
Fed a backlash
Ku Klux growth.
My father tho Protestant
Got Yankee-baited
And pushed Mom into
The Klans Women
Which he said
"The town's best people"
Had joined.
Momma nervous
Ex Catholic
Not quite virtuous
Liked "getting ahead"
Hid her background
Became chums with the City Secretary
And a big grain merchant's wife.
She took me to meetings
At Odd Fellow's Hall.
Left in the cloak room
With other small kids
I became chums with Buddy
The City Secretary's son
While the Ladies
Ku Kluxed thru their ritual.
My delicate red-head Buddy
Lived in fairy-tale land.
The three times we met
We told each other stories
Pledged unending friendship
Sang and hugged.
At one meeting
I saw my first stage play

Mom starred
As Miss Liberty the statue
Beset for half an hour
By screeching haridans:
Papism Modernism
Niggerism Kikeism Bolshevism
And such til Buddy's mother
As Woman of the Klan
Rushed in on a stick hobby-horse
Burning cross in one hand
Bible in the other
American flag in another.
How she managed that I forget
Maybe she juggled.
She screamed

"Don't worry
Miss America
I will save you!"

All the Kluxy ladies cheered.
When I called it stupid
Buddy stopped speaking to me.
Drama critics run the risk
Of losing friends.

Mom soon had enough
Of Klanswomen
And put an Al Smith poster
On our porch.

For years
I asked my parents
Every other night
To phone the guys
Who played records on the radio
Asking that the song
My Buddy
Be dedicated to me.
I crouched by the radio
Ecstatic

Listening for what I could hear
Of the song
Over the static
 "Nights are long
 Since you went away...."
Hoping he'd someday come
And take me away.

- - - Galveston, 1928



Form 111

KLORAN
or
RITUAL
of
THE WOMEN
of the
KU KLUX KLAN

Nº 27737

1928

IMPERIAL HEADQUARTERS
WOMEN *of the* KU KLUX KLAN
LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS

MY FATHER SAID

"Men can't be beautiful!"

My father said
But Oh! I knew they could!
Everywhere we went I saw beautiful men
So many kinds of beautiful!
Small or large dark or light
Rough or fine
I couldn't comprehend
How so many different sorts
Could be beautiful
Or why some
Whom others thought handsome
Didn't move me.
I couldn't keep my eyes off
Men and boys.
On streetcars
At band concerts
Or in speakeasies
Which was where my father
Pronounced his great truth
As if not even God could question it
I'd see many beautiful men
Men with strange magic
In their eyes in their hands
And the most magical
Might pick me up
Might even sing to me
While I snuggled in his arms.
"Men can't be beautiful!"
My father said it often
As if he knew that I knew better.
Gay consciousness was born for me
I think
When I knew my father was wrong.

- - - Galveston, 1930

BUCK ROGERS

I met Buck Rogers in the funnies
When I was eight.
Not well drawn like Tarzan of the Apes
Or Flash Gordon who came three years later
Buck was magic for me and I loved him
Travelled with him among the asteroids
With Wilma Deering and wily Doctor Huer.
The colored Sunday pages hypnotized me
Always leaving Buck or Alura
Buddy Deering or his sister in danger.
By Monday impatient for next week's serial
I continued the adventure my own way
Keeping young blond Buddy always close.
If a giant alien robot in Jupiter's Red Spot
Or Killer Kane's evil raiders trapped Buddy
Buck sped in on flying belt
Wrestling Kane to the death
And carrying Buddy off in his arms.
I'd feel those arms around me snug.
Imagined him singing

My Buddy, My Buddy
Your Buddy Misses You.

I drew spaceships and ray guns
And pictures of Buck in my schoolbooks.
I stared all afternoon at one strip
Seeing Wilma in danger
Hanging desperately onto Buck
Who held to a wire across an abyss
Wanting to hang there myself
Despite monsters on both sides
Hoping to merge into the drawing
Hoping to fly to Mars or Venus.
"Nonsense!" my father said
"Everything anyone could invent

Already has been!
Men won't ever fly above the clouds.
Much less beyond the stars.
Throw that damn paper out
And read something sensible."
My father was not a reader.
But if I couldn't precipitate myself
Onto the colored page
I cast the drawings in my mind
Expanding them
And walked around
For four years in space
In the 25th Century
With Buck and Buddy
Wrestled endlessly with Killer Kane.
By the time I was twelve
I'd learned to draw Buck nude and
Thinking about wrestling with Kane
As if with the Devil incarnate
Gave me a hardon.
I didn't know what that meant
But savored the feeling.

- - - Galveston, Pennsylvania, 1932-36

UNCLE CON & BILLY

Handsome dapper Uncle Con
A thin humorous man my cousin really
A graveyard caretaker in St Louis
Came to see us often.
I couldn't wait for his visits.
Once he bought me a white puppy
Billy whom I loved
Even more than cuddly old Snooks
The woolly poodle
Who belonged to our whole family
But snuggled most with me.
Uncle Con took me to a movie
And twice to the beach
Held me in his lap read fairy tales to me.
On a later visit Billy took sick
And Daddy told Uncle Con
We'll have to shoot the dog!"
What if I got sick?
Daddy wouldn't do it nor Mister Smitty
So Uncle Con went out in the garage
With a pistol
And shot my gentle Billy.
He bought me another dog
And Daddy said
"Don't get no sissy dog this time."
He brought Tex home
A fierce airdale black and brown
As if that made up for killing Billy.
I never much liked Tex
He often had wild fits
But was loyal to me
And while we had him
My parents dared not punish me.

- - - Galveston, 1932-3

DUTCH

People called my father Dutch
Pennsylvania Dutch
Fourth generation on a farm
In Turbett Township
North of Gettysburg.



Underage he'd escaped
His too-close family
Good wholesome religious people
He preferred to worship from afar.
He joined the army
To help General Pershing
Chase Pancho Villa in Mexico
Followed Pershing
To France's gas-poisoned Argonne Forest
And bloody Chateau Thierry
About which he'd never talk.

He joked about the Mexican campaign
Missed the camaraderie

The joshing men drinking together
Goosing each other.
He despised vets who bragged
Of battle adventures
Always suspecting that they
Like vulgar Uncle George
Who bragged as if he alone
Had beat the Bosches
Had stayed states-side
Til after Armistice.

Seeking from my father heroic tales
Resembling exploits
Of Camelot
I heard only randy jokes.
He was the life of drunken parties.

In Galveston
Stationed after the war
At Fort Crockett
My dapper father met and courted
Pretty Mary Peterson
Whose father had prostituted her
On Post Office Street.
They married with high ideals.
A good marriage in early years
While I was delivered to them
At John Sealy Hospital
For adoption.
The same John Sealy owned the waterfront
Where my father worked
Between railroad seasons.

Twice we visited his home
In rural Pennsylvania after I was one
Mom hated it there hated his sisters
For me it was heaven.

Back in Galveston
He lay once on the floor half drunk
Pained with four boils about to burst.
I crawled up with my toy pail and shovel

Innocently whacked his forehead boil.
His loud yelps scared me,
 When I was five or six
And Christened at Grace Episcopal
I'd wait each day for his return from work
Run down the block to greet him,
 He often dressed me up
And took me to
A newsstand - barber shop -
Shoe shine parlour on 21st
Where the town's hot dudes hung out.
He showed me off like a war medal
And asked everyone there
"Do you know what President Garfield said?"
Answering if they didn't
With a Presidential platitude
Flaunting quotes from Harding
Lincoln both Harrisons
Teddy Roosevelt McKinley.
 His jokes never changed over the years
I found them embarrassing even at six.
 But he wasn't all jokes.
As the Depression came on
With wide unemployment bread lines
Hooverville shacks on the mud flats
Not far from our house
A million-strong Ku Klux Klan
Strikes and broken unions
He was sometimes radical
Denouncing the selfish millionaires
Who owned the town
The Sealeys Moodys Kempners
Until John Sealy
Or Shearn or Bill Moody came in
And my father fawned
On the patrician
Saying after they'd left
That any man

With his pants pressed and shoes shined
Was as good a man as they.
But in front of them he grovelled
I felt shame for him

But loved it when we went for strolls
On broad Beach Boulevard
Or to Murdochs bathhouse
Or to band concerts in Menard Park
To speakeasies where he always
Showed off out-drinking everyone else
Or to the big grain elevator
He was helping build.

I loved it
When he massaged my ankles for hours
Because I'd been clubfooted
And wore braces til I was five.
Afterward I'd massage his scalp.
He was losing the wavy silken hair
He'd been so proud of.

As jobs and joblessness alternated
When he got drunk at work
And cursed the bosses
The marriage went bad.
After either Mom or Dad
Took me to speakeasies
Each having flirtations or more
Raging jealous fights
Were followed by love-making.
That I could never understand.

Before the Depression
Their drinking
Had seemed mostly fun
And the fights rare.

My parents changed
As hard times deepened.
When Dad worked
On waterfront or railroad
Often 16 hours a day

He came home aching tired
And drank himself to sleep.

 We took in a boarder
Mister Smitty
Whom I loved
And Momma slept with.
She was often drunk
When Dad got home
She'd goad him with taunts
About his mother and sisters
Whom he considered saints
And she called whores.
She'd bitch until he hit her
Again and again

Then they'd cry together and have sex.

 Trips with him to beach or park
Became promises
Endlessly postponed.

 He was worse when unemployed
Often for long months
When furniture man Mr Parker
Took all our furniture back
Leaving only the coral tree
Perched on an apple crate
Some pictures
And the Atwater Kent radio
Which broadcast mostly static.
When he'd spend long hours at home
In his BVD's
Stuff hanging out
I'd never seen before.

 They'd fight every day
And my love for him mixed with fear
Unless he went down to the waterfront
Or the railroad yards
To drink with his buddies

And agitate for a union
Or for the veteran's bonus
Or Fort Crockett
Where he sat in a large warehouse
Of canon shells bigger than I
Talking with a World War buddy.
His pants were seldom pressed
His shoes unshined.

The only place he'd take me
Was to barber shops
Which I hated.

A haircut every other week
Was his requisite
For being a man
Which he insisted I must be:
"Chin in chest out heels together"
Or something like that I forget.

He cursed that bastard Herbert Hoover
And General MacArthur
Who'd fired
On the bonus marchers
In D.C.

Once after Mom and I
And Freida Mills
Returned late from a speakeasy
On 53rd & S
Mr Smitty drove us home
Late at night
We heard racket in the back yard
Loud cursing smashing glass
He'd busted the furniture with an ax
Even the pictures and the coral tree.
Glass covered the floor
And he was smashing home brew bottles
In the high grass behind the house.
He didn't come in all night

Though Momma called at times
From the back door
Fearfully: "Dutch?"

Late next day
When Momma and Mrs Mills were cleaning up
He staggered in sobbing
"I'm sorry Mollie"
Dropped his clothes on the floor
Went out on the front steps
In his BVD's
And pissed on the rose bushes.
"Dutch! The neighbors!"
They screamed
Dragging him inside
Flopping him onto the broken bed.
He slept two days.

Soon after I acquired a sister
Whom I loved and protected.

Later he went to Houston
As S P Railway car inspector.
We followed him three months later
And family life improved awhile.
No speakeasies were nearby.
Drinking and fights less frequent
But no beach no band concerts
For him to take me to.

Once or twice a year
He'd accompany me to Church
Where his bragging and jokes embarrassed me
Or to Dr. Blair's Medicine Show
A carnival set up on Lyons Avenue
Three times a year.

Back in Galveston
Once on the waterfront
His boss told him to climb
Onto a rickety shed

Which Dad said wasn't safe
The boss insisted
The shed collapsed
Dad was in the hospital two weeks
And out of work two months.
The company refused to pay expenses.

I later worked for the company law firm
Found his case file
Was told by one of the lawyers
They'd spend 10,000 dollars

To keep from paying 100 dollars damages
To a worker.

"It would set a bad precedent."
After that Dad suffered for years
With crashing sick headaches.
He and Momma fought less
But never made love again.
And Momma's drunken boyfriends
Paid half our bills.

He got a railroad car inspector's job
In Tucumcari New Mexico
Came back briefly to Galveston
Then to San Francisco
With Southern Pacific.

I came out
After my sister and I
Followed him to San Francisco
Leaving our mother sad behind.

Being gay then meant powder and paint
And swinging your hips
I tried timidly to conform to that
But my hips didn't swivel good.

Once Dad said
I was acting like a pimp
His concept on a guy who wasn't manly
And he'd sooner see me dead.

I then moved to L.A.

Later to New York
Writing him occasionally
Telling about my life
But leaving out the heart of it
Borrowing money
Visiting at times.

When I returned West
At my lowest ebb
Staying with him briefly
I filled a long-winded diary
With complaints
Blaming him and Mom unfairly
For all that'd gone wrong
Something I wouldn't have done
At other times.

I soon got double pneumonia
Three weeks in the hospital
While he read my diary.
He never admitted reading it
But it must have hurt deeply.
I'd written awful things
I didn't ordinarily feel.

Years later
When he moved in with me
He'd often answer off the wall
Something I'd written
That was still bugging him
But he'd never discuss it directly
Or my gayness
Which I'd certainly talked about
In my diary.

I tried to discuss it with him
He'd change the subject.
But sometimes he'd still ask
When I was going to settle down
And marry.

I was working for ONE Magazine
America's first open gay periodical.
Copies lay around the house
He'd met others on our staff
Even been to our office door
But gave no indication
He knew what kind of magazine ONE was.
He'd never been a reader
But must have looked at some copies.
I tried to draw him out
About his childhood
And family
About the third cousin
Who was President
Either Buchanan or McKinley
About his father
Twice a Democratic National Convention delegate
And member of the Juniata County school board
About the uncle Doc Kilmer
Who'd invented a horseless carriage
About Aunt Ida
Who was like another mother to me
About his own war years
The early days of his marriage
His work experiences
The Depression
Attempts to start a union
Or his recollections of things
I remembered as a child
Splash Day or Mardi Gras
Mr Smitty our dogs Snooks Billy Tex
Or the day our canary died
And I ran to meet him after work
Screaming "Bobby's dead!"
He thought I'd said "Mommie's dead!"
He'd loved her then.

It all seemed blank
As if he'd forgotten
Everything in his life
I'd have been interested in.
He'd talk about the hateful woman

He'd married three years before
Who'd barred us from their apartment
And left him a year later.

He'd talk of some bum
Met on the street last week
Or about a guy he used to goose
In the railroad yards
And the guy would blurt out
Whatever was on his mind.

He'd never discuss my mother
Or the KKK Women's Auxilliary
He'd pressed her into
Because "the best people in town" were in it
Or admit that I was a foundling
Adopted by them in my ninth month.
I'd discovered that
Just before leaving Galveston.
When I asked he thought
I meant

He wasn't a good father.
He wasn't cut out for it
But he'd tried.
He still drank heavily
Spent most evenings in maudlin mood
Often with sick headaches.

I felt sorry for him
As if he lived
With boils about to burst in his mind
With pains and regrets he couldn't express
Or ever forget.

Did he recall

The idyllic years of his marriage?
Or blame himself for the lost jobs
For the long drunken years
And the awful fights?
Later he went on the wagon
Cold turkey
Then moved to Antioch
On upper San Francisco Bay
To be near my sister and his sister Helen
A jolly indulgent Popo
To my little nieces.
He'd fondle every little girl he passed
Gush over them
Enough to be accused of molesting.
Twice we visited a guy in Martinez
Pop had worked with
Once a couple in Walnut Creek
He'd known from Frisco.
Each couple had a girl about seven
And a boy about five
Sweet beautiful blond kids.
Each time as soon as we sat down
The girl climbed on Pop's lap
Cuddling the boy on mine.
I was embarrassed
But didn't want to make the kid
Feel unwelcome
Recalling how I at that age
Had gone for the laps
Of so many men.
Had the kids sensed
Which of us would be receptive
Or did each follow
Their own inclination?
The next time
I declined to go along
On these visits.

Pop remained a jokester
Stopping people on the street
With his presidential riddles.
Til the day he took sick
Taken under protest
To the San Francisco hospital
Where I'd had pneumonia.

He begged Aunt Helen to take him home.
In her car returning to Antioch
He straightened quickly in the back seat
Said "Stop!" and was gone.

But not for me
Until three weeks later
As I re-watched on the TV he'd bought
The ending of East of Eden
Watched James Dean become able at last
To talk to his father.

I cried halfway for the first time
He'd always told me "Boys don't cry"
I still can't really release emotion.
It chokes me.

Through all our talk
We never really communicated.

I should have told him I loved him.
Told him I'm a man
But not the man he wanted me to be.
I should have hugged him.

But he wouldn't have let me
His kind of man didn't hug.
It even took **me** years
To learn how to hug

Except in bed mostly with strangers.
Thrice at least
I dreamed him to life

Once at that old barbership
He was young and handsome

Loud with his jokes and riddles
And I wanted to tell him
How much I liked his jokes
How handsome I thought he was
But my voice stuck in my throat
And Uncle George drowned him out
With loud bragging.

Once in the dank locker room
At Murdoch's bathhouse
I saw him
Younger than I'd ever known him
Changing clothes
Then turning to goose Mr Smitty
Who hugged him kissed him
As I awoke.

Again I dreamed I was hitchhiking
Thru smooth Pennsylvania hills
I turned a corner
And saw him sitting
On a bench with Momma
He looked old and tired
Like the last time I'd seen him
And she young and pretty
As in a photo taken
Soon after they'd met.
He was singing
"But it was Mary Mary
Long before the fashion came...."
And I saw he was holding her
Dead in his arms
And crying crying
Saying "Mary I love you."

- - - Penna, Tex, Calif, etc, 1895-1964?

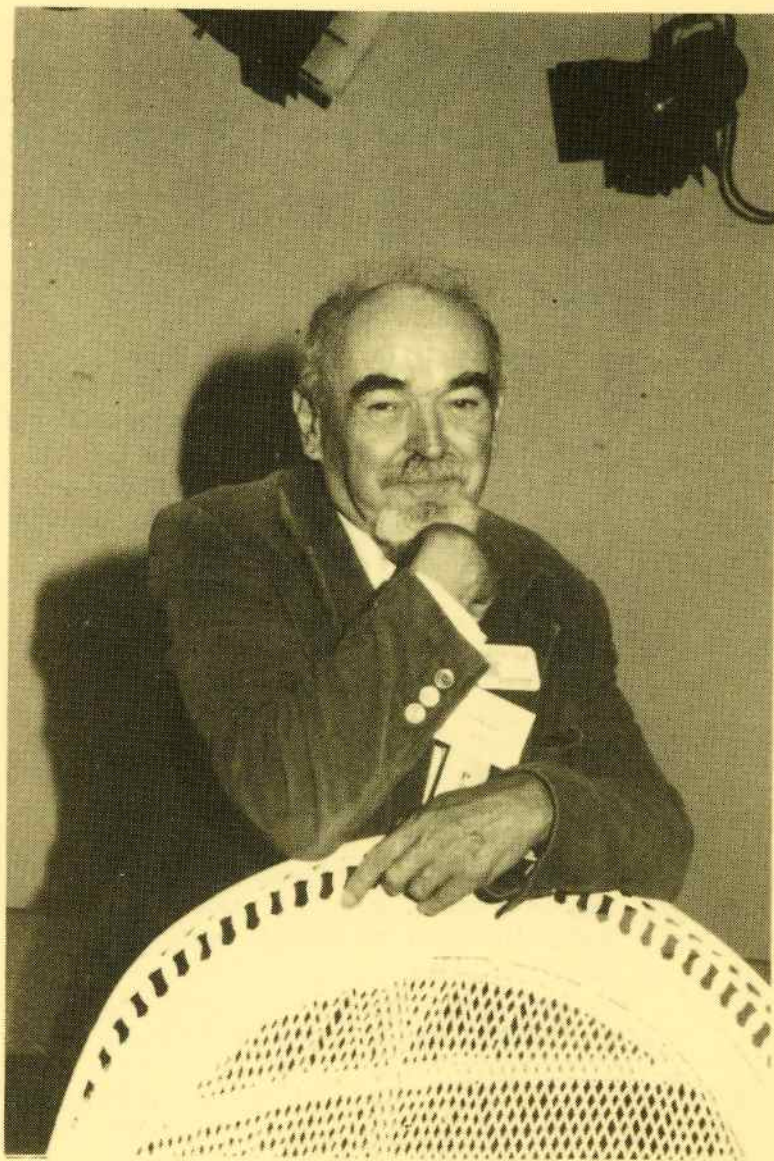


Photo of Jim Kepner, Jr by Eugene Bricker