

BY HON. GARY E. DONAHOE

THE SECOND SON OF A CRAZY MAN

It was late May 1997. The flight to South Bend was overbooked and crowded because it was graduation weekend. The drive from South Bend to St. Joseph, Michigan, was supposed to take about an hour.

I was headed to my sister's wedding rehearsal scheduled for that evening. I had never met my sister. While I drove through southern Michigan with my wife and daughter, I recalled the events that started me on this trip.

Growing up, I had few memories of my father. He was gone by the time I was three years old. My mother rarely spoke of him other than to say that he was an alcoholic or that he was crazy. My older brother never spoke of him. I gathered from the rare conversations that I overheard between my mother and grandmother that my father was a "mean drunk," a "crazy man" who had abused both my mother and brother.

I knew he was not dead because my grandmother would say every year or so that he had called her. The call usually came around Christmas time, and my grandmother would say that he

sounded like he had been drinking. So the years passed, and I had occasional thoughts about my father, but I never spoke to my mother about him because I knew her memories of him were painful ones. When I was in college, the calls stopped, so we all assumed that he had died.

I was in my thirties when my mother retired and applied for Social Security benefits. The woman at the Social Security office asked my mother if she knew anything about my father. My mother assumed it was about whether her benefits could be increased somehow by my father's work history.

She said that she thought that he was dead. The woman entered his name into her computer and told her, "No, he is alive and living in Anaheim, California."

That bit of information piqued my interest, and I decided to pursue it. I called directory assistance for Anaheim and asked if there was a listing for a Glenn Donahoe. The only listing was for a Michael Donahoe. I called. No, he didn't know any Glenn Donahoe, but he wished me luck in my search. I had no other

leads, and this was long before home computers and having the Internet as a resource.

Another 15 years passed. I was working for the court by that time. I remember coming home from work and my wife said, "Sally called." Sally was my brother's wife. Usually when I heard from them it was bad news, mainly stemming from my brother's behavioral health and substance abuse issues. So I asked, "What now?"

My wife answered with a little mischief in her voice, "Your father called her and gave her his phone number." Surprise is an under-



The bridge at Hall's Mill, near Saxton, Penn.

statement of what I felt. I called Sally and got Glenn's number.

The first conversation with Glenn was awkward. Over the course of several conversations, I did find out that he still lived in Anaheim, was retired from the U.S. Postal Service and that he claimed to have been sober for seven years. I asked if he would be willing to fly to Phoenix to meet my family. He said he would. After arranging a date when my brother could come to Phoenix from Tucson, I bought Glenn a plane ticket and sent it to him.

The phone was ringing at 4:00 in the morning, about two weeks before the scheduled reunion. It was my father. He did not sound sober to me, although at that hour, maybe I didn't either.

Glenn said that he could not come to Phoenix because he did not feel he could walk well enough to navigate the airports. I told him I could arrange assistance at each of the airports, but he declined. I believe he just got cold feet at the prospect of seeing his two sons after so many years.

I didn't know what to do. My wife then got into the act. She told me that this was my opportunity to meet my father before he died and that if I didn't do it I would regret it. She told me to get on a plane and visit him in Anaheim. So, with the cooperation of the airline, I exchanged my father's ticket for one for myself.

It was a bright October morning when I left Phoenix for Anaheim. My brother had declined my invitation to go with me. I had decided not to tell Glenn that I was coming for fear that he would avoid meeting me.

It was only a one-hour flight. I sat by the window and wondered the whole time what I would say to him if I was lucky enough to find him at home. As the plane descended into Anaheim, I recall seeing the smog rolling over the wing and wondering if I could do this.

I arrived in Anaheim, got my rental car and headed for Glenn's house. I knew that he lived in a small bungalow behind his landlady's house. I got lost once, but got turned in the right direction, and I knew I was in the right neighborhood when I saw the high school that Glenn had described.

As I approached the address, I slowed the car to a crawl. About a block before where I thought the house should be, I saw ahead of me an old man walking slowly on the tree-shaded sidewalk in the same direction I was headed. He had on a cap and windbreaker and walked with a cane. As I passed him, he didn't look my way, but I could see the profile of his face.

Though I had heard the expression "I felt my heart skip a beat," I had never experienced the feeling. But when I saw his profile, that was exactly how I felt. I had seen some old photos of my father, and I knew it was him. By the time I gathered myself, I had missed his driveway. I turned around and parked the car, but he was no longer visible. I hoped he had not noticed me and had gone into his house.

I walked down the driveway toward the door of the bungalow. The shade on the front window was closed, and I heard a TV. I knocked on the door. The voice that responded was gruff, if not angry. "Who is it?"

I answered, "Gary."

He shouted, "Gary who?"

Well, no turning back now, I thought, so I called back,

"Gary, your son." I could now hear him moving toward the door. Perhaps this was his nightmare—a child showing up on his doorstep.

As the door was opening, he shouted, "Goddammit, who put you up to ... " but he didn't finish the sentence as his eyes met mine.

It was like looking into a mirror. His face was a blend of mine and my brother's, but more of my features. It was obvious to him that I was his son and that he was my father. The gap of over 40 years of separation closed when that door opened.

I won't bore you with the details of our conversation. But he gave me some family history including the names and addresses of his surviving sisters. He still smoked Camels. He also told me that he had remained close to one of his stepchildren, Betty, who lived in Michigan.

After a three-hour chat, it was time for me to catch my plane to Phoenix. Before leaving, he told me that he believed his drinking had been a form of self-medication for the bipolar disease that had been diagnosed several years ago. He said that he had not kept in touch because he felt guilty for being a bad father. He asked my forgiveness.

Over the next couple of years, Glenn and I talked on the

honor a b l e m e n t i o n



n o n F I C T I O N

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phone, and my wife and two children met him while we were vacationing in California. I also got to know Betty through occasional phone conversations.

Betty called one evening and told me that Glenn was in the hospital and not doing well. He was suffering from throat cancer. He was not eating, and the doctor did not give him any hope. I arranged to meet her at the hospital in Anaheim.

After visiting my father in his room that day, Betty and I had lunch. We sat outside in a garden



e-mail. I learned that she had no other brothers or sisters, so she was very excited about having two brothers.

She invited me to her wedding. That is how I found myself flying to Michigan to meet my sister in person for the first time and to attend her wedding.

Unfortunately, not all the consequences of meeting my father were positive. When my mother learned that I had found my father and visited him, she was upset with me. She thought it was a personal betrayal. Telling her that my desire to get to know my father had nothing to do with her or our relationship didn't quell the anger. When I told her about Kelly, her displeasure with me increased. I never speak to her about Glenn or Kelly, and she has never really forgiven me for making contact with them.

Although I encouraged him, my brother never spoke with Glenn. I thought that talking with our father might ease some of the demons that haunt my brother. I think my brother regretted not making peace with him before Glenn died.

My father's story has one more chapter. My wife wanted to visit her father in Ohio, so

I negotiated with her a brief side trip to Saxton. I wanted to see my father's grave site. We flew into Pittsburgh. While driving to Saxton, my wife saw a sign for a covered bridge down a side road. Although I had never seen a covered bridge, I was anxious to get to Saxton and said that we could visit the bridge on the way back if we had time. She insisted, so reluctantly, I turned down the road.

The bridge was a short distance down a dirt road. It was a sunny, mild October day. The covered bridge and setting were beautiful. The bridge spanned a flowing stream, and the grass surrounding the bridge area made it look like a park.

I parked the car and started taking pictures. For the first few minutes, I did not notice the man fishing in the shadow of the bridge. My wife, who knows no strangers, started chatting with him about his fishing.

His name was Deveaux McElwee. As we spoke, I could see that he was older, probably the age my father would have been. So I asked him, "Do you know any Donahoes in the area?"

"Sure I do," he answered. "There is a Donahoe clan that lives in Saxton."

"Did you know Glenn Donahoe?"

"You mean Buck Donahoe? We grew up together, and I served with him during the war."

Well, it turns out that Deveaux knew my father and his family. He and my father had been drinking buddies, and he shared a couple of stories about Buck.



Clockwise from top: Glenn Donahoe in 1995; the author stands before the veterans memorial in Saxton, Penn.; the grave marker; the author at the May 1997 wedding of his sister, Kelly Disbrow.



area off of the cafeteria. Betty had another surprise for me. While I was chewing on a bite of my lunch, Betty

smiled at me and said nonchalantly, "You know you have a sister living in Michigan."

My jaw dropped. I said that Glenn had not told me about her. Betty told me that she and Kelly lived not too far from each other in Michigan. I asked Betty to give Kelly my phone number and to ask her to call me if she felt comfortable talking with me.

That visit was the last time I saw my father. He died shortly after I had returned to Phoenix. There was no funeral. I learned that he had been buried in his home town of Saxton, Pennsylvania.

It was about six weeks after Glenn's death that Kelly called me. Over the next year or so, Kelly and I chatted on the phone and via

During our conversation, he told us that he was just getting ready to leave when my wife started talking with him. If we had not visited the bridge when we did, we would not have met him.

After saying goodbye to Deveaux, we drove into Saxton. There, along the main street, we saw a memorial to World War II veterans. Carved in the granite was my father's name along with Deveaux McElwee's.

We then drove out to the cemetery. There was no directory, no office nor anyone to ask where my father's grave was located. Each veteran's grave was marked with a small flag, so my wife and I split up and started checking all the markers with flags. After an hour or so and walking over what we thought was the whole cemetery, we had not found his grave. We needed to get back on the road, so we started walking back to the car. I saw a flag that I did not think I had checked, so I said to my wife that I was going to check one last grave. As I approached, I could see that the flat marker was entirely covered by grass clippings. I knelt and began brushing away the clippings and the name "Glenn M Donahoe" was revealed.

"He was calling to you," my wife said as she came up to stand beside me.

I suppose he was calling to me. Some will say that the events of that day were just coincidence. But it seemed more than coincidence to me that an unplanned detour to a covered bridge led to a chance meeting with an old man who knew my father, and another detour to check one last flag led me once again to my father's side.

Despite my mother's anger, I am glad I met my father. I was able to give him something. I gave him the forgiveness he desired. He gave me more than some family history. We made our peace. I also realized that perhaps another description for that "mean drunk" and "crazy man" would be that Glenn was a man who suffered the consequences of an untreated mental illness most of his life.

I consider myself the winner. I was able to bring closure to an unresolved relationship, plus I gained a sister. 