

Barber, “Vic” and Elmah

The Barber family, their 1931 Buick loaded with all the family’s possessions, pulled into Sandpoint in the summer of 1934 and camped in an open field where Ella Street meets the lake. The Depression, the dust bowl, and the accidental death the previous winter of their youngest son, Reade, had convinced Vivian Dale “Vic” Barber and his wife Elmah Elizabeth Carothers Barber to leave their home in west Texas and seek a new life in the Northwest. Previous summer vacations had been spent camping in California, Oregon, Washington, and Idaho and they were convinced that the Idaho panhandle, so different from windy, dusty west Texas, was where their future lie. With them were their sons Victor Dale, age 13; George Lanier “Pete”, age 12; Vernon Carothers “Bob”, age 10; and Carroll Gene, age 5. Camped with them that first night by the lake were their neighbors and best friends, Archie and Bessie Clark and their children Duward, Lois, Oleta, Dee, Les, and Elmo “Toad”. The Clarks had travelled with them in an identical, but for color, ‘31 Buick.

Elmah Carothers’ third great grandfather, Andrew Carothers, had immigrated from Ulster and had settled, with many other Scotch-Irish, in the North Carolina piedmont before the American Revolution. Succeeding generations of Carothers moved progressively westward through east Tennessee, west Tennessee, and ultimately to east Texas, where Elmah was born on March 13, 1897. At the same time the family relinquished their traditional Presbyterian religion in favor the the Baptism of their southern neighbors. By the 1910’s the Carothers family had settled in Sylvester, in west Texas, where Elmah’s father was a shopkeeper and her brother, Vernon, was a telegrapher for the railroad. Elmah attended college at Hardin-Simmons in Abilene, where she studied pharmacy, receiving her BA degree in 1919. That fall, she started as an elementary school teacher in the small town of Spur, some fifty miles from her home in Sylvester. She boarded at the home of the county sheriff, George Levi “Lee” Barber, whose second son, “Vic”, almost immediately caught her eye.

Lee Barber's great-grandfather, Samuel Barber, was born in Maryland at the close of the American Revolution, was orphaned, and grew up with an uncle in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Samuel joined the Army and found himself in Louisiana in 1806 to help enforce the transfer of the Louisiana Purchase to U.S. jurisdiction. After voluntarily "unenlisting", Samuel married and started a family there. By 1829 Samuel had moved his family to east Texas, then still Mexican territory. Succeeding generations of Barbers moved to south Texas and ultimately to Dickens County, in west Texas, where Lee Barber was alternately shopkeeper, restaurateur, road building contractor, and sheriff. Just prior to moving to west Texas Lee returned for a few years to the east Texas county where his great-grandfather Samuel lived when the family first arrived in Texas in 1829. There, in Barbers Hill, Vic was born on July 26, 1900. The family was living in Spur in 1919 when the new schoolmarm, Elmah Carothers, came to town and boarded with the family. Lee's first son was already married, but his second son, Vic, was clearly struck by Elmah. The following February Vic and Elmah made a trip to Sylvester to visit her family; mechanical breakdown on the way back to Spur required an overnight stay in Roby. Common decency of the time required it, and the time seemed right anyway, so Vic and Elmah were married on the spot on February 26, 1920.

Over the next fourteen years Vic worked for his father in road construction and did his own contracting for the railroad as well as farming and ranching. Despite her wish for a daughter to join her sons, Elmah regularly produced more sons: Victor Dale on March 16, 1921; George Lanier on November 13, 1922; Vernon Carothers on June 29, 1924; Carroll Gene on November 22, 1928 ("the year the railroad came"); and Reade Wendel on September 23, 1930. By the late 1920's and 1930's times were very difficult in farming communities generally and the dust bowl years in west Texas were even worse. On December 7, 1933, three year old Reade drank from a bottle of "invisible ink" and died before medical help could be summoned. The following spring, after the lowest year of their life together, Vic and Elmah decided to move to Sandpoint, Idaho, a community they had visited the previous summer.

The family rented space first on Pine Street, then at 915 Church Street, and Vic supported the family by cutting and delivering firewood. Their last son Philip Bruce was born at this house on May 3, 1937. By

1938 Vic purchased most of the north side of the block of Church Street west of Forest up to the Moon Mortuary. He built the house at 802 Church; the lot to the west was eventually occupied by his brother



Elmah and Vic Barber with sons Carroll and Vernon, approx 1935

Archie Lloyd Barber. In 1940 Vic's father and mother moved to Sandpoint and later that spring Vic purchased the saw-mill at Moyie Springs and used it to produce railroad ties, employing all but the youngest of his sons. When the war broke out in 1941 Vic and Elmah's two oldest sons, Dale

and Pete, had graduated from Sandpoint High School—Dale first worked constructing Farragut Naval Base. Third son Vernon joined the Navy upon graduating in June, 1942, the same month that Pete married De' Arley Montague, daughter of Reuben Montague, a pioneer of Sandpoint. Pete joined the Navy that summer and Dale did likewise that December. The following winter Vic and Elmah bought the house at 401 Church, which had been built in 1915 by Charles Olson, owner of the White Swan tavern on First Street, and later was owned by William and Maybelle Nieman. During the war years, with the three oldest sons gone, the upstairs was often rented to Navy personnel from Farragut. In 1943 Dale brought Florice Smith, whom he had met while on duty in southern Idaho, to Sandpoint and they were married in the living room at Church Street. Then in 1944 Vernon brought Geraldine Trein, whom he had similarly met while on duty in Chicago, to the same living room for a marriage ceremony.

After the war years Vic resumed his summer trips north with a fishing excursion to Alaska in 1947, the year the newly constructed AlCan Highway opened to civilian traffic. Entranced by Alaska, he sent for Elmah, who spent the winter of 1947-48 with him in Fairbanks, and sold the house on Church Street.

Elmah was less entranced by Alaska, and she moved back to Sandpoint in the summer of 1948 and bought the house at 701 Sixth Street. By 1950 Vic had convinced most family members that their future lie in Alaska—son Carroll, who had graduated from Sandpoint High in 1948 was there; Elmah had sold the Sixth Street house and moved there with son Bruce; and son Dale had moved there with Florice and their daughters Sally and Sheri. By the following summer son Pete was there with De'Arley and their son Jim and daughter Deidre; and son Vernon was there with his wife Gerry and sons Alan and Dean. Vic's brother Lloyd had moved to Alaska as well and his father, Lee, had moved back to Texas. Sandpoint was temporarily without Barbers.

The Barber family thrived in Alaska, working in the trucking and construction businesses. By the 1960's, however, family members started drifting back to Idaho. Pete and his family moved to Lewiston in 1962, along with Vic and Elmah. Dale and family moved to Clarkston, across the river from Lewiston, in 1979. In 1972, Vernon attended the 30 year reunion of Sandpoint High School graduates—he enjoyed it so much that he and Gerry moved back to Sandpoint in the summer of 1976 and lived there until their deaths in 1992 (see Barber, Vernon and Gerry) and their sons Dean and David live there still. Youngest son Bruce married first Dixie Johnston and second Norma Patterson and, along with Carroll, still lives in Alaska as of 1999. Vic and Elmah both died in Clarkston, Vic on November 19, 1982, and Elmah on September 23, 1990. They are both buried at Lewis-Clark Memorial Gardens, Lewiston.

Vernon and Gerry's son Alan and his wife Heather re-purchased the family home at 401 Church Street in 1999 and plan to restore it to its original condition and retire to the Sandpoint area in 2001.