

The Path Through Life: John J. Heuer 1925 -- 2013

Life started out snug and comfortable for John Junior Heuer, born to John Otto and Pearl Evelyn on December 20th, 1925, in Story City, Iowa. Prosperity had taken off in the 'roaring twenties' and life was going very well for the Heuer family; John Otto was a successful blacksmith and had been fortunate enough to be able to buy a boardinghouse – which Pearl managed. Young John, called Junior by his parents, was their third child; they also had eight-year-old daughter, Evelyn, and four-year-old son, Richard. Story City was one of those idyllic, small towns that everyone imagines in the Midwest -- think 'River City' in *The Music Man* musical. It was situated on a lovely, meandering river -- the Skunk River -- and Victorian homes with those big front porches and stately trees lined the streets. And the townspeople were justly proud of their Grand Opera House built in 1913. Yes, Story City, in 1925, was a great place to raise a family! But alas, life has a way of throwing curveballs at you and tragedy struck the Heuer family not once, not twice, but three times: 1928, six-year-old Richard died of leukemia; 1930, the depression struck and John Otto's blacksmith business declined and rents from their boardinghouse became difficult to collect; 1938, John Otto died of a massive stroke at the age of fifty-eight, leaving behind Pearl, Evelyn, age twenty, and John Junior, age twelve.



It's rough for a boy to lose his adored dad and even tougher when that boy happens to be small for his age. Scraps with some of the local boys were not uncommon and, with the loss of his father, Johnny had to grow up fast. He found himself the only male in the family and felt the responsibility of having to pitch in on the finances. Pearl continued with the boardinghouse while Evelyn got a job typing. Johnny obtained various jobs: paper routes, loading bags of coal onto trucks, clerking in a local shop. But, still, the young man missed his father. Luckily, his Boy Scout leader, a local doctor, stepped in and helped him through those difficult adolescent years. Yes, those times were rough for Pearl and her two children.



December 8th, 1941, the United States enters World War II. Johnny was too young to enlist, but like all the fellows, was itching to do his part to defend his country. In the fall of 1943, at the young age of seventeen, after obtaining written permission from his mother, he enlisted in the United States Army Air Forces; he had desires of becoming a pilot. Unfortunately, that wasn't to



be. Turns out his diminutive size was perfect for a gunner's seat and he wound up as a tail gunner on a B-29 Superfortress – nicknamed, Rematroid, by its crew. He had flown close to twenty-five bombing missions over Japan when, suddenly, the war ended. He was on Tinian Island at the same time as the Enola Gay, another B-29. He remembered seeing it behind a fenced area and everyone was curious. Of course, nobody knew its significance – until a month later.

Immediately after the war, John took advantage of the GI Bill and attended the University of Iowa in the college town of Ames, just ten miles from Story City. Four years later, he graduated with a Bachelor's

Degree, majoring in horticulture with a minor in etymology (the study of insects). At the end of 1949 with a brand spanking new college degree, he was ready to take on the world! At barely twenty-four, he was still young, single and had his whole life in front of him. What to do? Where to go? In 1950, the world was the oyster for young men like John Heuer. And, it seemed that everyone was going – west! You know the old saying, *Go West Young Man*. Boy, did he!



He proudly bought a 1949 Ford two-door coupe and drove toward California – with a six-month stopover in Brownsville, Texas, to work at a citrus processing company, overseeing the quality of oranges packed and shipped all over the country. Boring! But it earned him some gas money and soon he was on his way again. California or bust!

Los Angeles, California, in 1950 was something else! Hollywood, citrus orchards stretching for miles, sandy beaches, sun and fun, Spanish-style bungalows with those funny arches and red tile roofs – so different than what you see in Iowa! And did I tell you about the pretty, sun-kissed girls? But first things first; after renting a room, John needed a job. He was resourceful and, with his degree in horticulture – and six-month stint at the citrus company in Texas – was offered a plum position as an inspector with the Los Angeles County Department of Agriculture. You see, in 1950 – believe it or not – Los Angeles

County was the top agricultural county in the United States. So, of course, the Department of Agriculture was a very important entity in southern California at that time. But before starting work, he had something very important to do: bring his mother, Pearl, and sister, Evelyn, out to California. Accordingly, he hopped into his coupe, drove the 1,700 miles to Iowa, and loaded them into the car. L.A., here we come -- again! Once back, John



immediately started his job with the County of Los Angeles. His mother, Pearl, was able to buy a lovely little duplex where she could live in one side with Evelyn and rent out the other side. (A couple of years later, Evelyn married one of John's work buddies: Ronald Witt.)

John was established; life was good; starting his career. Time to meet some girls! A year later, in November of 1951, he and a group of pals from work decided to go to the Figueroa Ballroom where Pete Pontrelli and his band were playing. John loved to dance, barely containing himself when he would hear that swing. Man, were there a lot of pretty girls -- and the joint was jumping! Despite his small stature, John was in great shape and was a good-looking fellow. He never had a problem finding a dance partner, his enthusiasm infectious. He danced with a couple of gals; they were nice, but then – there she was! Almost hidden amongst the crowd he spied the cutest girl he had ever seen. Well, that's the way he always described his first sight of his future wife: she was *really* cute, and short! It's good that he put it that way; he could have described her the other way around: that she was short...and really cute! Her name was Nova Clinton, and she *was* cute! She was vivacious with dark, wavy hair and deep, brown eyes. And, boy, could she dance! Even better, turns out she was originally from Iowa, too. A match made in Heaven!



Five months later, April 5th, 1952: John and Nova's wedding day. They had picked out a charming chapel with a lovely garden out back. And the day turned out absolutely gorgeous; sunny, warm, with the perfume of flowers providing the perfect ambience for a garden wedding. Nova's Irish-American family was quite large and the quantity of guests definitely tilted in her direction, but John didn't care; things were coming together so beautifully. He had just bought a little two-bedroom bungalow in El Monte, not far from Nova's parents' house and he was looking forward to the settled life of a married man. Life just couldn't get much better than this!



Well, yes it could! February 16th, 1953, a baby girl, Roberta Lynn, was born to John and Nova – an infant so small she was just 5 lbs. 5 oz. at birth. And, as a matter of fact, her Grandma Clinton, Nova's mom, used to tell the little girl that she was so tiny on that day when the new parents brought the newborn over, and her little mouth was open so wide, wanting to be fed, that she seemed just like a little baby bird. Grandma immediately nicknamed her Robin – and the name stuck. Nova's relatives followed suit, of course, and the girl was called Robin thereafter by all of the Clinton clan. So what did John and Nova call their daughter? Even they couldn't agree! Nova called her Berta -- sometimes Bert – but John seemed to prefer Becky. Suffice it to say, the little girl answered to many names!



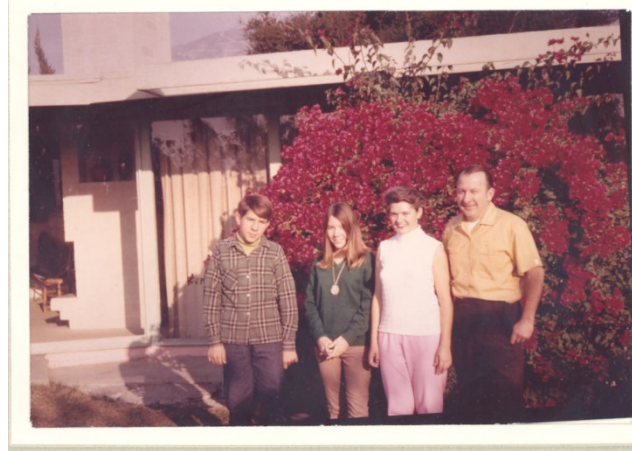
A son! November 9th of 1954, James Stephen came into the world. John was over the moon! It was important to him to have a son to pass on the family name. Being the only surviving male in his family, he wanted to honor his father with the continuance of their surname, Heuer. The little boy was cute and cuddly with dark hair and deep brown eyes like his mother. As a baby, he was a bit easier than precocious Roberta had been – either that, or Nova had figured out how to handle babies and didn't fret over him as much! As he grew, though, Jimmy gathered steam and, like many boys, often had more energy than he knew what to do with. John and Nova had to learn pretty fast how to handle a precious, but very active boy!

Just before Jimmy's birth, the young family moved out of their two-bedroom house and into a brand new, ranch-style home on five acres of property in North Whittier Heights (now called Hacienda Heights). There were lemon, orange and avocado trees on the property. So very southern California!

Roberta started kindergarten, the bright yellow school bus picking her up in front of their house every weekday morning. When Jimmy was about to start school, John received a promotion from the county, having earned his own territory in the San Gabriel Valley. Consequently, the Heuers sold their house and moved to the city of La Verne where they bought a house situated on two acres of a hilltop overlooking the valley. The house was unusual: long and narrow, made of concrete block, with big picture windows and a flat roof topped with sparkly, white rocks. Even better for the kids, it had a swimming pool. Roberta and Jimmy would spend many happy, summer days in that pool.



Life went smoothly for the next twelve years, a seemingly perfect American lifestyle. But, John wanted a bit more out of life, he was getting restless. His job was great, secure -- but was beginning to feel somewhat stifling. It was becoming bureaucratic and he found he had to do paperwork in the office more and more, spending less and less time visiting the farms. Plus – little by little, farmland was disappearing, eaten up by new housing developments; hordes



of people were moving to California, attracted by the great weather and the many opportunities that the Golden State promised. And John dreamed of being a farmer himself. Over the years, on Sunday

drives – a favorite pastime -- John liked to take the family to Oak Glen, located an hour's drive from La Verne in the foothills of the San Bernardino Mountains. Apples are grown in the small town of Oak Glen and it's rural and peaceful. He began to dream of apples, apple trees – and cider!



In November of 1973, Roberta married Ken Williams and, five years later, Jim married Becky Dixon. Now John and Nova were empty nesters, free to start thinking about – well, apples! John was able to retire from the County of Los Angeles with a generous pension after thirty years of service. He was fifty-five years old. In 1975, John and Nova sold their hilltop home with the swimming pool and bought twenty acres of property with a picturesque creek in the foothill community of – no, not Oak Glen, but *Oakhurst*. Oakhurst is located in central California, about forty-five miles northeast of Fresno on Highway 41, the road to Yosemite National Park. This was bare land, and John's idea was to plant eleven acres of young apple trees -- and then build a house near the creek. In the meantime, they would live in an apartment until the house was ready. They did this together, John and Nova; she,



totally supporting his dream – which became her dream as well. They constructed their house out of cement block – with Spanish tile floors and a red-tiled roof. With his own two hands, John built a dam in the creek to create a pond and then figured out a way to get that water pumped up the hill behind the house and fed into a large tank up there. Then with gravity feed, the water flowed down to the house and through their faucets! But that wasn't enough to water the orchard; a well had to be drilled for that. John was quite a tinkerer and handyman, always coming up with a way to do just about anything. He was a creative, resourceful, hardworking guy!

Life in Oakhurst became idyllic for the Heuers. It was the happiness that John and Nova had imagined. They had their own little 'business' -- growing, picking and selling apples. They became members of a square-dancing club and loved it so much that they became expert within a few years. Sometimes they traveled around the country performing with their group. They joined the boat club at local Bass Lake – even though they



didn't own a boat! They became part of a pinochle group and a hiking club. They made many friends in Oakhurst. Yes – a wonderful life, indeed! Then, they discovered cruise ships when their square-dance club went together on a square-dancing cruise. That was it; they caught the travel bug! The two cruised the world for the next twenty-five years, taking at least one voyage a year. It got to the point that, when trying to decide on the 'next cruise,' it was difficult to find someplace they hadn't already been! In fact, they decided that they liked to travel so much, they eventually cut down on their work with the apple trees. But, the truth was, it was getting harder and harder to take care of eleven acres of orchard; they reduced it to five acres. It's not easy when you're doing it yourself -- just the two of you.

I will cut this story short now, as dementia does when it strikes. No, it doesn't hit you all of a sudden; it's more subtle than that. At first you don't notice it; it's like a snake sneaking behind and hissing softly. It's there, you sense it, but can't quite 'see' it. At first, it's easy to ignore, then, seemingly all of a sudden, the snake strikes, life slows and then comes to a screeching halt.

John Junior Heuer, at the age of eighty-seven, passed away on April the 3rd, 2013, in Seattle, Washington. Surviving him is his loving wife Nova, daughter and son-in-law, Roberta and Ken Williams, and son and daughter-in-law, Jim and Becky Heuer. Four grandchildren will also greatly miss him: DJ and Chris Williams and Stephen and Jennifer Heuer.

We love you, Daddy! You are at peace now.

