

"Rope Walker"

As told to Jerry Klinger

My great grandfather, Hyman Tikvah Rabinowitz plodded the towns of the American Southern and Midwestern states for forty seven years selling shoes as a customer's representative for the Farkman Shoe Co. of Altoona, Pa. Great grandpa Manny retired in 1927 with a modest company pension that disappeared in the stock market crash of 1929, along with the Farkman Shoe Co. It was a terrible traumatic thing for him but it was a blessing for me. Gramps, I called him Gramps, to distinguish him from Grandpa Harry, Gramps's son. Gramps moved in with Grandpa Harry after all his money was lost.

Gramps was blessed by a long life, well into his nineties, with a sharp clarity of mind and flair for storytelling. My sister and I would sit with Gramps for hours deeply absorbed, frequently with our mouths hanging open, while he would share with us story after story about his life. But mostly, he shared stories of the Jews in the small towns of the South and the Midwest he had come to know.

I loved Gramps so very much. It was not until I was much older I got over the shame that I loved Gramps more than Grandpa. I never told Grandpa Harry about what I felt but he might have known.

Gramps shared with us a link to the old European world that he had come from with the New World he came to. He bridged for us the old world of anti-Semitic Polish Lodz and his Yeshiva where the Rabbi with the long smelly beard kept a special notebook. Every day the Rabbi would say, "boys stand up and show me your *tzitzit*". He would mark down in his notebook which boy was wearing his *tzitzit*'s and who was not.

Gramps used to joke that his mother got many notes sent home that Hyman was not wearing his *tzitzit* that day. God would know and weigh that against him on judgment day. Hyman was destined for some sort of Jewish Hell. It was not that Gramps was bad. He was just a young boy whose head was always far away. He just never thought about things when he ran out the door, late to his *Cheder* again.

God must have forgiven Gramps for always forgetting his *tzitzit*. The Rabbis had told me if God grants you life longer than seventy years you are assured of a place in Gan Eden. It is my hope to live past seventy so I can be with Gramps again someday.

There are many stories that Gramps shared with us. One of my favorites was about a man who, when he died, no one knew his name. On his tombstone was carved only "Rope Walker."

"Billy, did I ever tell you about...." was the way Gramps would begin a story. I would flop down on the floor in front of him and stare up at his wrinkled face, usually with a slight white grizzled beard. Gramps did not like shaving every day. He said he always nicked himself and could not afford to lose any blood. At his age he wasn't making any more and needed to keep what he had

stored up. "Otherwise I will lose my memory and not be able to tell you any more stories." When I was eight years old, I was hoping he never would shave again – just in case.

"It was 1898 and I was just finishing a business circuit through East Texas. Things were looking up for shoes that year. Money was flowing and flowing. People were getting more into buying store bought clothing. Oil had been discovered in East Texas a few years earlier, in 1882, in of all places Corsicana, Texas. A rancher needed water for his cattle and though it was always humid as anything, water was always scarce. If you wanted water you could hire a local Indian to do his rain dance. Chief Rain in the Face, or whatever his name was, would come to you. With tom-tom drums drumming away and moccasined feet dancing in twirling circles with prayer sticks and fire and smoke, the Indian rainmaker danced. He implored the Heaven to open the sky with water and nourish the land. He circled round and round, jumping, spinning, hooping and singing incantations for hours. It was all exciting but it rarely worked.

"The rancher had tried his praying for rain at his church on every Sunday for two months but nothing had happened. Billy, he told me, we sort of do the same thing when we pray for rain between Succoth and Pesach in the *Amidah* prayer. But then it usually doesn't rain where we are when we pray because we are hoping for the rain to fall in our homeland, Israel. It is a bit hard to say, because we are very far away, if the rain did fall. But trust in God, Billy. Just because it did not rain on you after you went to *Shul* to pray it does not mean that God did not do as we hoped he would do and had it rain in Israel.

"The rancher was getting more nervous not having the water. So, he hired a diviner. What's a diviner you ask? Well, you know what a wishbone is on a chicken. You and your sister Evelyn fight over it at *Shabbat* dinner. If you take the wishbone and then two of you pull on it, whoever gets the bigger half will get their wish granted. The rancher was sort of doing the same thing with his diviner. He hired Mr. Edward Hilliard, water diviner extraordinaire.

"Mr. Hillard came out to the ranch. He pulled out his water divining rod that he kept carefully wrapped up in a blanket. It was actually a stick with a long shaft and fork at the far end in two parts – one pointing right and the other pointing left. Mr. Hilliard was supposed to have the divining gift. He could walk over a person's land holding the divining stick outstretched in front of him. As he walked he would feel the stick slightly pull him in the direction of water – right or left. Mr. Hilliard walked for hours about the ranch – this way then that. Each time the divining stick would direct him. It was getting on about noon and pretty darn hot, or perhaps it was just lunchtime, but suddenly he stopped. His divining stick began to slowly twitch up and down. With one more turn to the right about eight paces on, his divining stick pointed straight down. That is where you will find water he announced to the rancher. If you drill your well right here you will find all the water you need.

"The rancher didn't wait or question anything. It was coming up on calving time and he could not continue to bring in water by wagon to the more remote areas of his ranch. Times were hard and he needed every calf to be saved.

"A drilling crew came out and drilled. They drilled and drilled some more, finding only dry soil. The rancher said drill deeper but the soil samples coming up showed no water only they smelled

funny, pungent and became slightly gooey. It was almost time to give up but he told the driller one more day and then we will give up when it happened. He did not find water. He found "*black gold, Texas tea*". That water well found oil. That rancher found the first oil well west of the Mississippi River. Corsicana boomed.

"The dusty, unloved, nowhere town of Corsicana bolted onto the map of America. People flooded in. The main street went from just a couple of dry goods stores and saloons to a real city with brick front buildings and wooden sidewalks. Yes wooden sidewalks. The streets weren't paved in those days and when it would rain it would be a real mess. There was another practical reason for not paving the streets. All you know about is cars. You don't know much about horses. When a car passes by all that is left behind is the exhaust from the tail pipe. When a horse would pass by, his tail pipe left something other than gassy exhaust. Can you imagine the mess on the street from all those horses if everything was paved? Now, who was going to clean that up? It was easier leaving the street unpaved.

"I had three business accounts in Corsicana in those days. It was always a pleasure to come to Corsicana because it had a vibrant growing Jewish community. Jews in Texas, you are wondering. Yes, Jews in Texas and they did not get off the boat yesterday. Jews have been part of Texas life since the very beginning. Jews fought with Sam Houston and the young Republic of Texas in the 1840's helping liberate Texas from the Mexicans. Under Mexico, Jews were not wanted in Texas. Only Catholics were permitted to own land and have freedom of worship.

"You ever heard the name Albert Moses Levy? Judging from how you're shaking your head I guess the answer is no.

"Albert Moses Levy was born in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, about 1800. His family moved to Richmond, Virginia in 1818. Like many a good Jewish boy he went to medical school graduating from the University of Pennsylvania in 1832. With the death of his wife three years later, Levy moved to booming, raucous New Orleans, Louisiana at the edge of the American frontier. Revolution was in the air. Texas, the seemingly natural extension of the United States, was reaching to free itself from the colonial control of Mexico; Texas independence first, union perhaps later.

"Levy enlisted with the New Orleans Grays, a volunteer regiment that was formed to join the Texas revolt. The regiment was soon engaged in the siege of the Mexican fortress of San Antonio de Bexar, December, 1835. The Army of Texas was poorly armed, clothed and fed. Morale at Bexar was low. The men were ill prepared for a long siege and many were at the point of abandoning the effort to capture the fort.

"Albert Moses Levy, the fighting Jewish medical officer of the Grays, was crucial in turning the tide from disaster to victory at Bexar. Bexar, or as it is better known today, the '*Alamo*', fell to the army of Texas.

"Sunday, March 6, 1836, the Alamo was weakly defended by 183 Americans from 23 states and from five different countries under Col. William Travis and frontiersmen Jim Bowie and Davy Crockett. It fell to the huge army of Mexican general Santa Anna. The surrendering defenders

were brutally massacred. Among the dead were Avram Wolfe and his two young sons ages 11 and 12. They were Jews who joined the fight for Texas freedom. It was not a freedom in name but a freedom in reality.

"Later Jews fought for Texas in the Civil War. Jews have been patriots of Texas for as long as there has been anyone calling themselves citizens of the great State of Texas.

"Corsicana had its Jewish community too. They were building their new synagogue, Temple Beth El. It was something from out of my past with two large onion domed cupolas, on either side of the grand two story façade, rising forty feet into the sky. It had stained glass windows from the famous glassmaker Tiffany. It wasn't fancy. It was grand. It wasn't just that it was a new building, it was unlike anything Corsicana or East Texas had ever seen architecturally. It was a statement that the Jews are here and we were welcome.

"When I first started selling shoes and traveling, I was told in Pennsylvania, that I had better change my name. Hyman Tikvah Rabinowitz was not going to sell in the South. My Polish Yiddish accent was bad enough but advertising on my business card that I was a Jew was not a good idea they told me. So I changed my name to Manny Rabin. You know, in all the years traveling it was true that in some places they did not like me because I was a Jew. In all the years though, I never, ever, felt anything similar to the bigotry and anti-Semitic hatred that I did in Poland. America is different I was told in Poland, and you know something, America is different. America is special.

"Like everything else in Corsicana it was still being built when I was there that hot July day in 1898. It was July 28, I remember it well because of what happened.

"Corsicana was celebrating something new being built or something new being dedicated all the time. It was growing so fast that just opening a new store and hanging out a huge banner with the grand opening announcement was not enough. You had to do something that would attract attention. The biggest dry goods store ever was opening that day, Meyers and Henning Dry Goods Emporium. M&H, it was called for short. 'The Biggest Shovels to the Biggest Bodices, We Have It', was their motto.

"They needed something to get people into town and into the store. They did not have radio – they had word of mouth and gimmicks. Bands worked sometimes, even marching bands but what worked best to get folks into town to see what was what, was something new, something that had never been seen before.

"M&H came up with a brilliant gimmick. They had a band playing and they even got the mayor to stand in front of the store and cut a grand opening bright scarlet ribbon. What really got the people to come outside M&H was the special traveling, astounding, astonishing, amazing, unbelievable, never seen before or probably never again, act of strength, gravity and common sense defying stunt. They had hired a 69 year old one legged, the other was a peg leg – like a pirate – man to tight walk across a rope strung across Beaton street, from the second story of M&H to Jackson's Saloon and Gentlemen's Relaxation Salon.

"The rope was drawn taught between the two buildings twenty maybe it was thirty feet in the air. I am not sure anymore. What was even more amazing is that the ancient one legged tight rope walker was going to do this amazing feat carrying a full sized stove on his bare back. Can you imagine carrying a stove on your back – that is very hard. Now try this walking a rope high in the air and with only one leg.

"M&H gathered quite a crowd for the noon event. The band struck up a high note and the people grew silent. Sam Hennings proclaimed to all that the "rope walker" would be performing but he needed absolute silence to perform his dangerous act. He had done it many times in the past. But he had to concentrate and silence was called for. The street grew quiet even two barking dogs were grabbed and thrown into a shed in back to shut up their yapping. It was so exciting as Rope Walker appeared in a sky blue outfit and bowed to the assembled throng. Every eye was upon him as two strong young men hefted a stove on his shoulders and then stepped back. Rope Walker adjusted the weight and with his good leg tested the rope gently then with his full weight. He edged out little by little, the awkward sight transfixing every tongue in every mouth. My own mouth turned dry one wrong step and.... Rope Walker edged out, his good leg leading and feeling the rope, his peg leg stabilizing him from behind. Slowly he edged out foot by foot until he stood in the middle of the rope high between the two buildings in the middle of Beaton Street and smiled a semi-toothless smile to the crowd. He was an amazing sight of courage and strength. My heart was beating very fast with excitement and amazement.

"From the far side of the street it happened. The rope across from M&H had not been tied securely enough. The rope started to sag and then suddenly I saw that Rope Walker knew he was going to fall. It was terrible. The people screamed as he fell to the ground with the stove crashing down and crushing his chest. We all surged forward but there was nothing to do. A priest rushed up and offered him a chance at confession and last rites before he died. He only managed to look up into the priest's face and say, *'I am Jewish. Please bury me with my people'*.

"The funeral was the next day at the Hebrew Cemetery in Corsicana. Everyone attended. We never did learn his name. Rumor was that he came from Princeton, N.J. but we were never sure. When he was buried a tombstone was erected over his grave. It said simply – "Rope Walker". You can go to Corsicana someday and you will find this unknown Jew resting amongst our people in the Jewish cemetery to this very day."

Gramps died about a year after he told me this story. But then he told me many other stories about his life and the Jews of the South and the Midwest. That will be for another time.

I am getting older myself and I decided to write down the stories for my own grandchildren so they will know who they are. Someday they will wonder about Manny Rabin and why I changed our name back to Rabinowitz.

As told by William Rabinowitz, of Boynton Beach, Florida.