

In Memory of Mel Correll

The Seven Things I Admire Most about My Dad and His Life

By John Correll, Mel's Oldest Son

April 8, 2009, Melvin William Correll passed on.

He succumbed to increasing congestive heart failure. He battled it valiantly to the end. As my brother Bob described, "When he takes his clothes off, he looks like one of those holocaust survivors you see in World War II concentration camp photos." (Bob and his wife Gail have been diligently providing for Dad and Mom's care since November 2006, at their home in Gaffney, South Carolina.)

As a personal digital-age tribute to Dad and his life, I herewith describe seven things he accomplished that I admire most.

EAGLE SCOUT

Born January 7, 1919, Dad was the second-youngest of a large family. The family resided in Lima, Ohio. At around age three his father died. His mother — not able to support the large family — put the younger children up for adoption. Soon, Dad was taken to Sodus, Michigan to become the adopted son of Earnest and Evie Correll. Sodus was then, and still is, a sparsely-populated farming community located in southwestern Michigan, just east of Benton Harbor.

Earnest and Evie Correll lived on a 40-acre farm. It was not a prosperous commercial farming operation, like we know today. But, rather, it was a subsistence farm. Its purpose was to provide essential food and shelter for a family's survival. As such, the farm consisted of a couple horses used for pulling a plow — a couple cows for providing daily milk and butter — some chickens for providing eggs (and an occasional stewed chicken dinner) — and a few pigs, which provided the main family meat. (Grandma wouldn't eat beef because she said it tasted like tallow.) The farm also had several fruit trees and a variety of agriculture, including — as best I can remember — corn, asparagus, potatoes, beans, berries, and wheat. There was no indoor plumbing. Water came from an outside hand-pump. Light came from kerosene lamps, as they had no electricity.

It was a meager life-style, to put it mildly. Spare money was scarce; savings was non-existent. Up until age 16, Dad never wore a new piece of clothing. Everything he had was second-hand, which came from nearby family and friends that had outgrown it. His youth consisted mainly of attending a one-room rural school house for grades 1 through 8 and assisting his father with working the farm. For personal spending cash he would trap muskrat during the winter. And, he was involved in Boy Scouting. During this time he achieved Scouting's highest rank — Eagle Scout.

If you don't know much about Boy Scouts, achieving the rank of Eagle may not seem like much of an achievement. But, I was a Scout, and I know that it's rare and not easy to come by. I've always admired Dad for accomplishing it.

GRADUATED MICHIGAN STATE COLLEGE

About a mile down the gravel road where Dad lived (Hartman Road, to be exact) was a special man in Dad's life. His name was Alec Gale. Alec was a successful fruit farmer. He was unique for the area at that time — he had a college degree. It was a degree in agriculture from Michigan State College (now Michigan State University), located in East Lansing, Michigan.

Alec also was Dad's Scout Master.

One day after graduating from high school (Eau Clair High School), Dad stopped by Alec's place. Alec then asked him a question that would alter Dad's life course.

"Melvin, what are you going to do now that you're out of high school?"

Dad's response was, "I don't know — I guess I'm just going to keep on living with Mom and Dad and work the farm."

Alec then said, "Why don't you get a college education?"

Dad said, "I have no money — I can't afford that."

Alec replied, "You can go to Michigan State College. You can get a job there to pay for your tuition. And, I can give you a letter of reference for a place where you can work."

Dad thought about it for a couple days, and then decided to pursue Alec's suggestion. It was easy to do. He simply informed his parents that he was going to go to college. He packed up all the clothes and possessions he had into a single suitcase. And, his father drove him the 100 or so miles to East Lansing in his old Model T truck, and dropped him off. That was it. From there Dad got a job as a cook in a diner. He sought out a cook's job because he figured that, at least, he'd always be able to get some food to eat each day (that he was working).

Other than helping prepare meals at the farm, Dad had no cooking experience. As he once explained it, he bluffed his way through the cooking job. Fortunately, the diner's menu had pictures on it. So, Dad simply prepared the plates of food to look like they did on the menu.

Not long after enrolling at the College, Dad discovered that it had a Hotel Administration Program. (It was one of two in the nation at the time, the other being at Cornell.) The head instructor of the program was a man named "Bunny" Proulx. Dad met him one day, and Professor Proulx convinced Dad to major in hotel administration. This decision put Dad into a lifelong career in foodservice and restaurant management.

After a number of years, including a hiatus of a couple years for serving during World War II, Dad graduated Michigan State College with a B.A. degree in hotel administration. Now, to some folk today this might not seem like much of an accomplishment ... until it's

put into context. He did it with not a penny coming from his family or anyone else. He did it *on his own*. He didn't even have the money to buy textbooks. To learn the material, he went to the library each night and read the assignment in the library's books.

To me, all this is a rare, noteworthy accomplishment. I've long admired Dad for it.

WORLD WAR II VETERAN

Not long after arriving at Michigan State College, Dad discovered a program called ROTC — a program for training reserve army officers. He had no interest in joining the army or being a military officer. He signed up for ROTC because they *paid* you for being in the program. Plus ... they gave you two *free* uniforms. (Translated: *free clothing*.)

Of course, in due time he graduated the program at the starting rank of second lieutenant. During this time he met Glenna Irene Potts, an MSC "coed." They courted, and then married on September 13, 1942. Of course, they were still married, over 60 years later, when Dad passed on.

With America's increasing involvement in WWII, Dad was soon called into active duty. He was trained as a Forward Observer for an artillery battery. A Forward Observer, in case you don't know, is a soldier who goes to the front-most point of the front line to observe the position of the enemy, and then radios back to a battery of eight artillery guns, telling them where to aim their fire. Of course, this job requires being at the point of maximum conflict.

A few weeks before I was born (May 1944), Dad was shipped overseas, to England. Eventually he ended up in an armored division, first stationed in France and, then, in Luxembourg. It was at the front line in Luxembourg in December 1944, when the Battle of the Bulge broke out. This battle turned out to be the bloodiest of all battles America fought in World War II, with over 70,000 casualties. Dad was one of them.

After several days into the Battle, a soldier ran up to Dad and told him a German anti-tank gun was maneuvering into position for a side-shot of his tank. (Each Forward Observer had a tank assigned to him, for taking him wherever he needed to go.) Dad jumped onto the back of the tank, grabbed the microphone and told the driver to pivot 90 degrees right as fast as possible. Just as the tank was almost facing the anti-tank gun, it fired. The shell careened off the side of the tank and blew shrapnel everywhere, including into Dad's face ... and both eyes.

There were no medics on the front line. They were a mile or so rearward. So Dad climbed off the tank and began walking to the rear. After about a mile of walking he finally reached a medical area. He said the hardest part of making the walk was seeing through the blood that was running down his face and into his eyes.

Eventually, he ended up in a hospital in England. His left eye was mutilated beyond recoverability. It was removed. His right eye had shrapnel in it, but was still operable. The operating surgeon pulled out most of the metal pieces. But some of it couldn't be removed, as the surgeon explained, without causing blindness. So it was left in place. And, Dad lived with it that way for the rest of his life. During his recovery the surgeon informed Dad that the fact he can still see with his right eye, after the amount of shrapnel that was in it, "is a miracle." Dad never forgot the surgeon's words.

In addition to losing an eye, the war imposed other sacrifices, as well. Dad had gotten trench foot (a rotting big toe) and a gastrointestinal ailment that periodically bothered him to the end of his life. It derived from eating only chocolate bars for 10 days straight, while in Luxembourg and the Battle of the Bulge.

In my early years (during the early 1950s), Dad seldom discussed his experiences during the War. He would say “war is terrible.” When I would “play war” outside with my friends, it bothered him greatly. He would tell us to stop doing that. When I asked him why, he would respond that we shouldn’t be pretending like we’re killing people. “Killing is a terrible thing,” he would say.

I remember one time in the mid-50s when one of the family members was into a bout of pouting and self-pity. Dad tried to “talk the person out of it.” But to no effect. Finally, he sighed and said, “Whenever I’m in a bad or sad situation, I recall what it was like back in the war. Nothing is as bad as that was. And, then I realize, no matter how bad or how tough my present situation is, it’s not as bad as it was then, and then I feel fortunate and happy to be alive and living a normal life.”

As you might guess, Dad’s little narrative didn’t stop the person’s bout of self-pity. But, as an observer hearing it from the side line, it was something I never forgot.

Circa 1960, Dad was saved (in the fundamental Christian sense of the word). It occurred when four evangelists from Oklahoma visited the First Methodist Church in Birmingham, Michigan. By midlife he began to tell his “war story” as a key part of his testimonial. Telling it seemed to become second-nature to him. It seemed like he had extricated himself from the deep emotional pain that he carried from it. So it was, from the 1970s through the 1990s. However, in the last years of his life he began to complain of “having bad dreams.” The “bad dreams” seemed to become more recurring as time went on. One time, a couple months before he died, I had asked him how he was doing. He responded, “I sleep all night and half the day. And, whenever I sleep I have bad dreams. I wish I didn’t have them.”

I inquired, “What are you dreaming about?”

He replied, “Of situations when I was young ... and during the war.”

Dad was 25 years old during the Battle of the Bulge. He returned from it with an *unending* physical affliction and emotional burden. An affliction and burden that he lived with and, one way or another, suffered from every single day of the next 65 years of his life. But, most people don’t know this, because he seldom ever griped or complained about it. He lived with it and did his best to mitigate it. It was not until long after I had become an adult that I realized the extent of the sacrifice that my Dad had made, and was continuing to make, on behalf of his country ... and, therefore, on my behalf, as well.

I greatly admire my Dad for his service to his country during World War II — and for the uncomplaining sacrifice that he made on its behalf, to the very end of his days.

CORRELL CATERING — ENTREPRENEURIAL INNOVATOR

After Dad returned from the War and graduated from college he worked a number of jobs — including Director of a dormitory at Michigan State College, Manager of the first Howard Johnson's in Michigan, Salesman for Stanny-Morris-Livingston Meats, Director of the Pontiac Hotel food & beverage operations, and cook at the General Motors Tech Center.

Then, circa 1954, he started a small catering business in our home at 1436 Washington, Birmingham, Michigan. It was dubbed Correll Catering. He did this while working as a cook at the GM Tech Center.

The catering business grew slowly but continuously over a year until it reached a point where he and Mom figured it could support the family. Then, Dad left his cook's job, found a rental space for the catering business, and installed a small commercial kitchen. The unique thing about this is: Dad did it all himself. He didn't have the funds for hiring contractors or installing new equipment. So, he did the entire space renovation himself and equipped it with economical used equipment. Some of the equipment he even made himself. Yet, it was a fully-functional commercial kitchen created "on a shoestring." Correll Catering was not only a creation of hard work and sweat equity. It also was a work of entrepreneurial innovation and genius. This continued to be the situation for the next ten years.

During this time, Dad created and implemented numerous innovations. One of the most memorable included the Chuck Wagon Cookout. Eventually he created two complete "chuck wagon rigs" so we could do two cookouts on the same day. Each rig consisted of a portable bar (which Dad made), a chuck wagon (which Dad created from old farm wagons), a special charcoal grill for finish-roasting prime rib over charcoal, copper kettle for cooking the corn, and numerous other unique features that people loved.

It seemed that no challenge was too big for him. One time a client called and wanted to know if Correll Catering could roast a whole steer for a cookout. "Sure," he replied. He then went to work building a giant rotisserie for doing it. To this day, I believe it was the world's largest rotisserie. The entire unit was about six feet high, ten feet long, and six feet deep. The front side consisted of two huge doors that would swing open. It contained a huge rotisserie shaft that actually turned. Welded to the shaft were 1-inch diameter stainless steel spikes, for holding four quarters of a steer. And, of course, the entire thing was disassemble-able and portable.

Also during this time, he — along with Mom — created other entrepreneurial spin-offs. This included bottling and selling the company's unique "Chuck Wagon Salad Dressing" in grocery stores, and a tart shell business that made and sold packs of tart shells to grocery stores.

Career-wise, the early years of Correll Catering — 1955 to 1963 — were probably the happiest, most fulfilling years of Dad's life. The business grew each year. It provided enough income to support his growing family, plus have some left over for a few "luxuries." And, it didn't require working 60 hours a week, as all his prior restaurant

management jobs had. He could actually fit in four one-week vacations a year. During this time he concluded that having a catering business was the ideal situation for him ... and he promised himself that he would never again go back to managing a restaurant!

However, fate eventually conspired to cause him to renege on that self-promise. In 1963, his landlord didn't renew the rental on the kitchen space. So, Dad moved his catering kitchen a few miles across town to a low-cost vacant space in a depressed retail business district. On each side of the space that Dad moved into, there also was a vacant space. The landlord of the building wanted desperately to get businesses into them. One day he made Dad an offer he couldn't refuse. Dad made the decision to lease the spaces on each side, and to open a restaurant. He called it Correll's Corral.

Typical of Dad, he built the entire restaurant himself (with the help of his now larger sons). We tore down two barns for wall paneling and ceiling beams. We actually *made* the tables. For seating, we refurbished antique chairs. We put in the plumbing, electrical, lighting, flooring, and on and on. It was unique and wonderful. Only one thing was wrong. It was in a *bad* location — a depressed business district. Dad thought he could overcome the weakness of the location. But — as restaurateurs have been finding out for decades — it's nearly impossible to overcome the downside of a bad location.

So, in the end, the catering business was the money-making host and the restaurant was the money-sucking parasite. And, eventually, the parasite succeeded in sucking the life blood out of the host.

At the end of the 1960s, Dad sold it all and he and Mom moved their family south — specifically, to 410 S. Phelps Avenue, Winter Park, Florida. Here Dad and Mom lived until November 2006, until they moved to live with Bob and Gail in South Carolina.

Due to one fateful decision — to renege on a personal vow and open a restaurant because the “rent was too low to refuse” — the original Correll Catering (of Birmingham, Michigan) never realized its full potential.

Still, in the first 10 years Dad had it, the original Correll Catering burned brightly. It was one of the most innovative, unique, enterprising entrepreneurial startups there was.

I very much admire Dad for this accomplishment.

NORTH WOODS FAMILY CAMPING

In 1957 — at the onset of the halcyon years of Correll Catering — Dad purchased a fishing boat. It was 16 feet long. When I came home from school one day and first saw it sitting in our driveway, I thought it was the biggest, most beautiful fishing boat I'd ever seen. It eventually was dubbed the “Merry-C.” This boat became the hub of the Correll family's summer life for the next 10 years.

At that time Dad started a family tradition that has continued (intermittently) to this day — the “French River Fishing Trip.” In the 1950s and 60s, this trip consisted of a week of fishing in the lower French River (in upper Ontario). The first two trips were to a fishing lodge. But, after Dad got the Merry-C, he decided to save money and do it as a camping trip. So, he purchased a giant tent, sleeping bags, air mattresses, and all the other camping accoutrements.

This trip was truly in the wilds. It was primitive camping. Dad would make this trip with four and, sometimes, even five medium- to young-age boys (ages 6 to 14). For the boys, it was frolic. But for Dad, it was pure WORK!

The night before departure, Dad would spend until midnight or later packing the boat and station wagon. The trip required a 12 to 13 hour drive. So, departure was shortly after dawn. The loaded-down station wagon and boat would arrive at the river around sundown. Then, there was a 15-mile boat ride down the river (often in the dark) to a spot that had become the “Correll Family campsite.” Then, there was setting up the tent and so forth. Dad, also, of course, prepared all the meals and supervised “fishing operations” in this 16-foot boat packed with young boys ... for five days! And, the thing was, the boys often caught fish ... but Dad usually caught very little.

Soon, Dad began to invite other dad-son combinations to go along. I suspect it might have been to help him with the work. Or, perhaps it was to provide him someone other than grade school boys to talk with.

Collectively, those trips crystallized into a form of Correll family legend. Memories of all sorts — happy and sad — swirl around them. And, not just for me and my brothers, but for certain of our friends who went, as well.

Years later, after I became a family man and father, I began reflecting back on those camping-fishing trips. At the time, I didn’t realize the incredible amount of work that Dad put into them — summer *after summer*. I never, ever would have put that much work into a family “vacation” trip. To this day, I don’t know how he did. I don’t know why he did it.

I only know that I greatly admire him for having done it. And I’m most appreciative that he did.

EXCEPTIONAL GENEROSITY

Over the years, Dad and Mom took many people into their home. They provided room and board — gratis — to both family members and near-strangers. The first such person they took in was Grandpa Correll — from 1955 to 1970.

Then, there were a number of others. Many of them I don’t even know, or only barely know, because I had long since left the home nest.

They did this in every place they lived, on both Michigan and Florida.

Very few people open up their home to others the way Dad and Mom have. In a sense, it can be viewed as an ultimate expression of hospitality, or Christian love.

I’ve greatly admired the magnanimity of both Dad and Mom for doing this.

ALWAYS HIS OWN MAN

After the family moved to Florida in 1971, Dad eventually re-opened Correll Catering. But, his heart was no longer into it.

Instead, he began channeling his creative energy into another pursuit — defining his spiritual beliefs and telling others about them. This became his consuming passion, mission, and joy — to the end of his life.

He spent many hours, often in the middle of the night, reading his Bible and writing down what he believed various passages meant — what he thought God was saying through them, and what he thought human beings should be believing and doing as a result of it.

In many ways, Dad’s emerging belief system aligned with the beliefs of fundamental Christianity. However, in other ways it also departed from the mainstream of fundamental Christianity, or what most fundamental Christians advocate. Thus, in the end, what resulted is: Dad formulated his own unique interpretation of the Bible and unique version of Christianity. Or, in short, he created his own Christian religion.

Armed with his unique beliefs and firm convictions, he dedicated the last 30 years of his life telling others of them — trying, in his own way, to help others live a better life, and, literally, trying to save the world.

He seized every opportunity he saw for doing such. He labored for hours putting his beliefs into the written word. Finally, his first book, *How to Win the Invisible War*, was published in 1981. In every conversation and social setting, he was alert to seizing any opportunity to speak of his beliefs and to tell others how they could put these beliefs to beneficial use. In church, he volunteered to conduct seminars, so he could present his beliefs.

As the years went by, and we entered the 1990s, I realized that Dad truly lived his life as his own man. He never once held a belief because someone told him it was the right belief to have. He never once forsook a belief because someone told him it was the wrong thing to believe. He never once accepted a belief because it was something “the Church” advocated, or was something that “everyone else” believed. He never believed that someone else was better prepared to communicate with God than he was, just because of having a “higher” position. He never believed that God communicated to someone else more than He communicated to him, just because of having a “higher” position. He never believed that someone else was better-equipped to interpret what the Bible is saying, just because of holding a special religious education or degree.

He always believed what he believed because they were *his* beliefs. And, while it made him sad to be laughed at or shun when he attempted to explain his beliefs and to get others to adopt them, he never forsook his beliefs when it happened. He simply kept on trying to explain his beliefs ... and trying to get others to act on them, because he believed that doing so would make the world a better place.

In short, when it came to religion, Christianity, and personal beliefs, Dad was truly his own man.

On my bulletin board is a quote that reads:

The strongest man in the world is the man who stands alone. (Thomas Huxley)

If that be true, then in the context of religion, Christianity, and personal beliefs, Dad

was one of the strongest men in the world.

Because of this — and for this — I admire Dad greatly. Of all the admirable accomplishments that he has done, this is the feat for which I admire him the most. He truly lived his life as his own man.

* * *

In closing, here's an interesting anecdote about Dad.

Many years ago, every Sunday he would pull out an LP record, put it on the phonograph, and listen to a particular gospel song — the same song every Sunday. It was his favorite of all. Since you've read this far, you clearly have a special love or fondness for Mel Correll. To listen to that song, click the first link below. Then sit back, close your eyes, and say a prayer — or hold a fond thought — for Melvin William Correll.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcF75h4BHk8&feature=related>

If you enjoyed the first version (above), you'll probably enjoy this one a lot, too.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86rmU65hlzI&feature=related>