

## **William Fredrick Febry (6/26/19-6/11/68)**

William (Bill) Fredrick Febry was born in the summer of 1919. He was the middle child of Floyd Febry of Lake Geneva in eastern Wisconsin. As was true for many Americans at the time, his family was heavily involved in agricultural activities. Floyd kept a large chicken farm. He sold young birds to local farmers and raised animals for slaughter. Bill, his brother Clair, and sister Ellie, were raised on a farm where formal education and highly skilled labor was less important than the tasks that could be taught by peers and manual labor.<sup>1</sup> The two years of high school he completed would have been sufficient to ensure his success if he had chosen to continue in the same trade as his father.<sup>2</sup>

However, Bill stood at the cusp of major changes in American history. The stock market crashed in 1929 when he was 10. He grew into manhood during the Great Depression, watching the dairy industry in Wisconsin grow steadily weaker. By the time he was 14, Wisconsin dairy farmers had seen many consolidations in farms and creameries as well as a steady erosion in the economy. Milk prices were 50% of what they had been just three years previously. A milk strike throughout the state in 1933 was so acrimonious it led to three different factory bombings and the murder of a 60 year old farmer.<sup>3</sup> His choice to leave high school early may well have been influenced by a need in the family for additional income, but it doubtless was not to rejoin his family in farming activities. By the time Bill was 22, he was an auto mechanic.<sup>4</sup> His career

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Pond, interview with author, September 2017.

<sup>2</sup> National Archives and Records Administration. "US WWII Army Enlistment Records 1938-1946." Online publication - Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2005. Original data - Electronic Army Serial Number Merged File, 1938-1946 [Archival Database]; World War II Army Enlistment Records; Records of the National Archives and Records Administration U.S. World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946 Ancestry.com (accessed September, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Chris Foran, "War Comes to Wisconsin Over Milk Prices -In 1933," *Milwaukee Wisconsin Journal Sentinel*, Green Sheet, May 10, 2016, <http://archive.jsonline.com/greensheet/war-comes-to-wisconsin-over-milk-prices--in-1933-b99720276z1-378882341.html>.

<sup>4</sup> National Archives and Records Administration.

choice paralleled that of many in the country. America was very gradually transitioning from a primary to a secondary economy. The bulk of the gross domestic product production would slowly shift towards manufacturing and industry.

Ironically, this push towards a manufacturing economy was strongly stimulated when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and pulled the United States into the Second World War. A need to supply the front lines galvanized and strengthened many American industries.<sup>5</sup> A story in the *Marshfield Daily News* notes Bill and Clair enlisted together along with 33 other recruits from Beloit less than a month after the Pearl Harbor bombing in late December of 1941.<sup>6</sup> He would join the Air Corps, serving with the 32<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Squadron.<sup>7</sup> The squadron flew antisubmarine patrols off the California coastline until it was deployed to Europe in the late summer of 1942. These B-17 planes flew missions over occupied Europe, dropping bombs on military and industrial targets. They were reassigned to the invasion of North Africa during the Tunisian campaign and also flew missions over Sicily and Italy in 1943. By the summer of 1944, they were on bombing missions as far west as Russia.<sup>8</sup>

During the war, Bill rose to the rank of technical sergeant.<sup>9</sup> Somewhere in his adventures he encountered an English nurse he fell in love with. Her name was Elizabeth Ann Higgenson. Perhaps it was during one of his frequent bouts of tuberculosis that they met. Perhaps it was at a dance. But we do know that by the time the war ended, they were married in Christ Church, in Lancaster, Lancashire England on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, in 1945. Their first child, Patrick Febry,

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<sup>5</sup> Doris Goodwin. "The Way We Won: America's Economic Breakthrough During World War II," *The American Prospect*, Fall 1992, <http://prospect.org/article/way-we-won-americas-economic-breakthrough-during-world-war-ii>.

<sup>6</sup> "New Daily Record of 126 Army Enlistments Set Monday by Milwaukee Recruiting Offices" *Marshfield News-Herald*, Marshfield, WI, Dec 30, 1941.

<sup>7</sup> Holly Ulvestad, interview with author, September 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Maurer, Maurer, ed, *Air Force Combat Units of World War II* (PDF) (reprinted), Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1983 [1961]. <https://media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/21/2001330256/-1/-1/0/AFD-100921-044.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Pond, interview.

would be born in March of 1946. Elizabeth and Pat would sail on the Queen Mary to the United States with many other English brides and children. They rejoined Bill at the Smoky Hill Army Airfield in Salina, Kansas, where they resided until he left the service in the late 1940's.<sup>10</sup>

The world Bill knew as a young man had changed considerably. America was benefitting from the economic marvel known as the post-war boom. The US highway systems were expanding. Factories that had channeled increasingly efficient manufacturing into products for the war machine now found a steady market in the American public employed in the industrial economy. Many mass manufactured goods were now cheaper than ever; including the automobile. By owning a car, it became possible for a family to live farther from the city center, opening up access to cheaper land on the outskirts of the city. The birth of suburbia began. It became increasingly important for cities to fund additional infrastructure and services for these new neighborhoods.<sup>11</sup> After his time in the military, Bill spent several years as a police officer working in the expanding city of Aurora, Colorado.<sup>12</sup> A daughter, Susan, soon joined the family. One of the most memorable events during his service as a police officer was the tragic jet plane crash in Aurora in 1950 that killed the pilot, severely injured a civilian, and set three houses on fire.<sup>13</sup>

In 1951, the family moved to Rapid City, South Dakota, where they would reside for the next decade. Here, Bill found work with the United States Postal Service, again, helping to serve the needs of an expanding public population and city structure in the communities around the Black Hills. Two more daughters, Deborah and Holly, were born during this time. Unfortunately,

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<sup>10</sup> Pond, interview.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth T Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> Pond, interview.

<sup>13</sup> "Jet Plane Crash at Aurora Kills Pilot, Severely Burns Civilian as Three Houses are Set Afire by Blasts," *Greeley Daily Tribune*, May 15, 1950.

pulmonary illnesses that began to manifest in the war continued to worsen for Bill. He struggled with continual bouts of tuberculosis, an infectious disease that gave him a chronic cough, sometimes causing him to spit up blood, suffer from fevers, night sweats, and weight loss. Streptomycin was developed as an antibiotic cure for the disease in 1946, but Bill's illness never cleared.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps his lungs had been heavily damaged, or perhaps his strain was antibiotic resistant. Certainly his illness was complicated by an additional diagnosis of emphysema and a smoking habit. At this point in time, the medical community's understanding of airways and breathing complications was still in its infancy.<sup>15</sup> Regardless, his wife's experience as a nurse served him in very good stead, as she continued to treat him.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, chronic illness made it difficult for Bill to maintain his employment at the post office. He left his position and the family moved to Hill City, South Dakota, in 1961. At this point, he began a brief period of work in the Holy Terror Mine in Keystone. However, the damp, dusty conditions soon worsened his health considerably, and he was forced to leave his position. His health had deteriorated so much, he was unable to work at all. At home, he had little to occupy him each day. Although he was always happy to spend time with his children and take them fishing or for a drive, the tedium of life without steady employment was difficult for him. Eventually, he and Elizabeth would agree to an amicable divorce, although they remained good friends.<sup>17</sup>

In the early summer of 1968, on the advice of a doctor, William Fredrick Febry drove south with a friend to Deming, New Mexico. He was seeking a drier climate that might make it easier for

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<sup>14</sup> "Tuberculosis Fact sheet N°104," *WHO*, October 2015, Archived from the original on 23 August 2012.

<sup>15</sup> PMA Calverley and JA Wedzicha, "Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, Past, Present, and Future," *Thorax*, Dec: 62(12): 1026-1027. 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Pond, interview.

<sup>17</sup> Pond & Ulvestad, interview.

him to breathe. He died there, at only 48 years of age. His legacy lives on through his children and descendants.<sup>18</sup> He was laid to rest at Black Hills National Cemetery.

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<sup>18</sup> Pond, interview.