

Me, Mush, and Tom

Life Was a Gamble



PATRICIA GAMBLE WILSON

With Rodney Wilson
Illustrations by Justin Arnold

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Part *Little House* and part *The Waltons*, this funny and warm-hearted memoir of life on a small Missouri farm in the 1950s is told through the eyes of a young girl, the seventeenth of eighteen children, and her sisters, nicknamed Mush and Tom. These delightful stories, wonderfully illustrated with original artwork, recall a more innocent age, and, ultimately, eulogize an entire family. Over 150 photos and illustrations.

“Work was proceeding at a good pace when a rabid dog, out of its mind and foaming at the mouth, appeared from nowhere, stumbled across our yard and burst through our dry-rotted screen door, finding itself confused inside the house!”—Excerpt from “The Mad Dog”

“Dad worried about the sky more than he worried about anything. Would it rain? Would it rain soon enough? Would it rain enough? Would the crops survive? These questions haunted my father, both when he was awake and in his dreams.”—Excerpt from “Drought!”

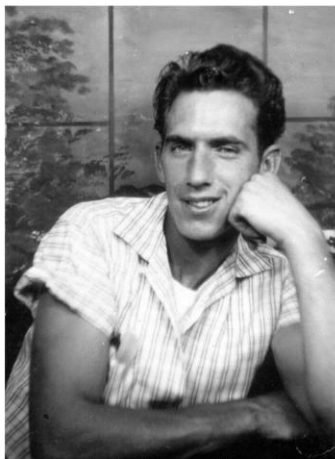
“The death of my brother Paul on December 14, 1959, brought the 1950s to an abrupt and mournful end. We were one kind of family prior to that tragic day and we were another kind after.”—Excerpt from “The 1950s Are Over”



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Paul, shortly before his death.

98. The 1950s Are Over

The death of my twenty-four-year-old brother Paul on December 14, 1959, brought the 1950s to an abrupt and mournful end. We were one kind of family prior to that tragic day, and we were another kind after. There was something so enormously devastating about his death that we just couldn't go back to being who we once were. We entered the 1960s almost as though the 1950s had never happened.

Paul had been living with our sister, Cookie, in De Soto, Missouri, for several months, commuting with buddies to his punch press operator job in St. Louis. On the evening of December 14, as they headed south on Highway 67, an automobile driven by an intoxicated driver crossed the median

and plowed into the car in which Paul was a passenger. He was taken to the newly opened Jefferson Memorial Hospital in Festus, where an hour later he died.

Today, thanks to cell phones and texting and Facebook, we can share information with all who need to know in a matter of minutes. In 1959, the news spread slowly. In a large family such as ours—some with phones, some without—it took several hours for everyone to know that our lives had changed. Pauline knew before Homer did. Kenny knew before Mom and Dad did. Some members of our family had already entered their grief, while others went about their day, unaware of the spiritual crisis they were about to face.

Cookie was informed of the accident by telephone. Sam Boyer, whose nephew was also in the car and also died that day, and his wife Dorothy Gamble Boyer (Uncle Matt's daughter), picked Cookie up and took her to the hospital. There had been a mix-up in the ER. Cookie was at first relieved to learn that Paul would be okay. A few minutes later, however, a nurse brought Paul's billfold to the ER for Cookie to identify as Paul's. With that verification, relief turned to sorrow—Paul had indeed died. To dispel all uncertainty, Sam Boyer was asked to identify both Paul's body and the body of his nephew, Vincent Boyer.

Cookie had called our sister Beulah the moment she learned of the accident. Beulah and Pete arrived at the hospital as quickly as their car could get them there, by which time Paul had been confirmed dead. Cookie's husband, Earl, was a long-distance truck driver and was away from home, so Beulah's husband, Pete, handled the hospital personnel's questions. (He

is listed as the informant on Paul's death certificate.)

My brother Dave was in Potosi, where someone told him that they had heard that his brother had been in an accident. Dave rushed home to tell us, and to let us know that he was taking off to De Soto. His worn tires were as thin as onions, he later told us, but he had to get to De Soto. He had to know what was happening.

Mom turned on the radio, thinking perhaps there would be some report, but the programming was no different than any other day. Tragedies are personal, after all, not universal. It wasn't too long after Dave left that Homer and Marion's car pulled into the driveway. My brother Kenny was living with them at the time, and he had been at their house that terrible moment when Pauline and Don arrived with the news. After consoling Pauline, to the extent that she could be consoled, Homer and Marion left for our house. Pauline and Don drove to De Soto.

When I saw Homer's car, I knew the news was bad, because he and Dad had recently had a falling out and hadn't seen each other for several months. Homer arriving at our house meant the worst, I feared. And I was right. The news was devastating—our twenty-four-year-old brother was dead. The house fell silent for a moment, and quickly gave way to an avalanche of tears.

Dad ran out of the house, through the back door. Mom asked Homer to follow him. To this day, fifty-four years later, I can hear Dad's deep moans and painful cries, like those of a wounded and suffering animal. Dad's tears came from deep in his soul. It was the first time I ever knew of Dad crying. (As I

write this memory, I can barely see through my own tears.)

Fay had married in August. The only children left at home were Dave, Barb, Ricky, and me. We hugged Mom tightly and held on to her with all our strength. Mom cried, too, of course, but not the way Dad did. I think Mom felt that with Dad in such distress she had to hold herself together. She had to be strong. She had to take care of us kids.

Dad remained inconsolable. Mom slipped from our grip and went out the door, rushing to Dad's side. Marion told us we would be spending the night at Cookie's in De Soto, so we needed to pack a few things. Dad pulled himself together. He and Mom and the rest of us crammed ourselves into Homer and Marion's car and headed to Cookie's house.

Pauline, Paul's twin sister, also arrived at Cookie's, along with her husband Don. Paul's death hit her harder than it did anyone. For weeks prior, she had had nightmares of a gray coffin and the smell of funeral flowers, only to wake up prior to seeing who was in the casket. Now she knew who it was. She later said that the flowers at Paul's funeral smelled precisely like those in her dream and that Paul's casket was identical to the casket in her nightmare. My sweet sister never completely overcame this profound loss. It was this trauma that contributed to a lifelong battle with depression.

That night, Cookie's house was full, so her best friend Reba Shunk took Barb and me home with her. Reba slept on the couch. She gave Barb and me her bed. As night fell at Cookie's home, Mom went to Paul's bed and lay on the spot where he had slept the night before, with the indentation from his head still resting in the pillow. Paul's supper was still

sitting on the stove.

At the visitation at Sparks Funeral Home, all the family gathered—from oldest, Blanche and her family, to youngest, ten-year-old Ricky. Our tears came in waves. With less than two years separating them, Kenny and Paul were especially close. When visitation ended, Kenny could not imagine leaving Paul alone at the funeral home. He sat there, saying he wanted to stay the night there, with Paul. Homer had to persuade him to leave with the family.

Kenny and Paul had a custom each year of finding the family's Christmas tree sometime in November, for chopping down in mid-December. That year, they had already marked what was to be the family tree for Christmas 1959. But it was never harvested. We didn't have a tree that year. And Kenny ignored Christmas for many years thereafter, as the onset of December's cold weather always brought Paul to his mind.



The next day, at the funeral at New Diggins Church (at left, in a 2013 photo), I sat next to Beulah and Pete. I don't have a detailed memory of that day. Perhaps my

mind is protecting me. I do remember that it was a dreadful, rainy day. The rain was pounding against the tin roof so hard one could barely hear the preacher. It never stopped. Paul's open grave had flooded. My brother-in-law Earl gave someone some cash and asked them to run to town to purchase a pump,

to clear the grave of water before the funeral service ended. Paul did not have a vault—it wasn't a standard item in 1959—so his casket was placed directly in the waterlogged ground. I overheard Dad that evening tell Mom how worried he was that all that water was getting into Paul's casket.

Some family members couldn't make it to the funeral. Grover had been gone without a trace for seven years. No one knew how to contact him. The Red Cross contacted Maxine and Bill, who were stationed in Germany, but they were unable to fly home on such short notice. Maxine sent a telegram to Mom and Dad, with her love and sorrow and regret that she was unable to be with the family.

After the funeral, my sister Barb and brother Kenny went to stay with Pauline for a few days, to make sure that when Don was at work there was someone in the house with her and her five-year-old and two-year-old sons. I stayed home with Mom and Dad, and helped Mom write and mail thank-you notes to those who had provided food or flowers.

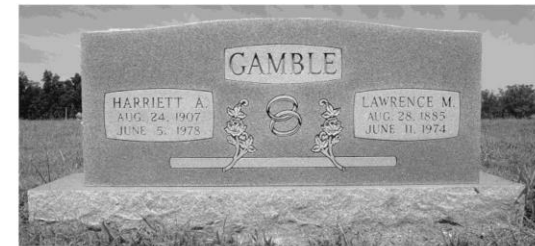
The last time Paul was at our home prior to his death was on Thanksgiving. Mom had a large dinner prepared, but there was no corn on the menu. Paul noticed some hickory cane corn in the freezer (by 1959, we had both electricity and a large freezer). He asked if Mom was going to cook any for Thanksgiving dinner. "That's for Christmas, son," Mom answered. But seeing the look on his face, she grabbed a few ears and began preparing them for him. On Christmas Day, eleven days after Paul's death, Mom said to me that she was so happy that she had gone ahead on Thanksgiving and for Paul made the corn that was planned for Christmas.*

Mom was the beneficiary of Paul's life insurance policy through his work, about \$4,000. With that money, in March of 1960, Mom and Dad purchased a small house in Springtown in which to start life over again. Only Dave, Barb, Ricky, and I moved into this home. Mom and Dad were almost finished with parenting.

Within weeks, Dave was in the Air Force. In 1963, Barb married in May and I married in June. By Christmas that year, four years after Paul's death, for the first time in their married lives, only one child was living at home—my fourteen-year-old brother Ricky. Dad had his Social Security—what he called his old-age pension—and in many ways Mom and Dad were living the best years of their lives. At least until old age and ill health set in, as they always do.

Following a massive stroke in 1974, Dad died in that home, at eighty-eight. My sister Fay and her husband Clyde, having never had children, moved into Mom's house and cared for her until she died, at seventy, in 1978. They are buried next to Paul.

**This is a perfect example of the fallibility of memory. Barb recalls that Mom had not made the corn for Thanksgiving and suffered regret at Christmas. Either Barb misheard or I reimagined the memory, to make it more pleasant.*



Mom and Dad's marker at New Diggins Cemetery, Springtown.

99. A Generation Goes...

The truest verse in the Bible is found in Ecclesiastes: "A generation comes and a generation goes, but the earth endures forever." We know that's true, and still we never quite believe it, thinking that somehow ours will be the generation that doesn't pass away or that at least we ourselves will somehow escape the walk through the valley of the shadow of death. But all such thoughts are, to again quote from Ecclesiastes, "vanity of vanities."

All of my aunts and uncles—on Mom's and Dad's side—are gone. Mom and Dad are gone. Most of my siblings are gone. Of my father's three children with his first wife and fifteen children with my mother, only five of us remain on this side of the thin line that separates the living from the dead. Perhaps within as little as ten years, we five also will have joined the procession that leads right out of this world and into the next one. In the meantime, Paul's admonition to the