



The Best Man I Know

*Stories by and about
John F. Dean*

By Diana Dean Laurent



March 20, 2011

John Frederick Dean

March 20, 1915 – February 20, 2012

My Dad was a very special person. To know him was to love him. He was the most unselfish, loving person many of us have known or will know. I am an only child, but Dad also served as a father to his nephew, Dave Morse, and to my husband, Lew. According to Dave, “he is the best man I know.” That sums up John Dean.

There are, in my view, three areas of his life that were most important to him and defined him: family, music, and the Marine Corps.

He told me wonderful stories about his life. I’d like to share them with you, and some of my own about him. Please forgive me if some details are inaccurate. I am writing from memory.

*Diana Layten Dean Laurent
February, 2012*



*Pop and Flossie Dean with John,
Leota and Henry - about 1916*



*The Dean Kids
Henry, Bee, John
Vi and Leota*

Family

The Dean-Norris Family

Dad was born at home in East Peoria, Illinois, to Henry (Pop) and Flossie Dean. He was the second of 6 children. One of his brothers died in early childhood, which left a family of 2 boys and 3 girls. The oldest was Leota, then John, then Henry ("June" to the family), Bee, and Vi. It was a very close, loving family in very hard times. Living nearby were grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. His Mom died before I was born, and Pop died when I was very young. I don't remember Pop, but I do remember great-grandma Norris, great-aunt Bea, great-uncle Johnnie, and a few others vaguely.

"Pop really liked you. He would try to fool you. When he visited one time, you were no older than 3, and you asked him where he was going to sleep. He told you he was going to sleep in a tree. You looked at him funny because you didn't believe him. 'She's a really smart one, isn't she? Can't fool her!'"

"One Christmas Eve we got a phone call that a whole family of our relatives was killed in an accident when a train hit their car. I'll never forget the look on Mom's face when she answered the phone."

The Deans lived in a little house on Pekin Avenue. Dad lived in the house until he joined the Marines, then returned to the house after

the war until he married. His mother died in 1941 before Pearl Harbor while Dad was in the Marines.

Great-uncle Johnnie was Pop's brother. Relatives tell me that Dad was correctly named after him. Their personalities were very much alike.

Great-grandma Norris lived in Mackinaw in an old farmhouse. I remember playing in the cemetery across the street, and in the cornfields behind the house. She had a cat that lost a leg to farm machinery. Her kitchen had a sink with an old-fashioned hand pump, and the "facilities" were out back. Another relative lived next door, and she had "the" telephone, one that you had to crank, with the speaker on the wall and the earpiece on a cord.

"Grandma Norris always had her table set. She would set the table right after washing the dishes."

Great-uncle Charlie Norris was a WWI veteran and the Mackinaw Village Marshall. He was murdered in the line of duty in 1957.

"They caught the guy that killed him. During the trial, they made the mistake of putting the prisoner in the same elevator with June. They had to hold June off the guy."

I remember great-aunt Bea, who lived in East Peoria near Dad's family. She was a mischievous woman, who enjoyed teasing people

with a twinkle in her eye (kind of like Dad). I liked her a lot.

“Aunt Bee liked to play ‘Polly catch a worm’ on unsuspecting male relatives. She’d sneak up on them, pinch them and laugh when they jumped.”

Dad must have inherited her genes, because he was often the instigator of practical jokes and relentlessly teased his sisters and brother.

“I had a BB gun as a kid. One time June bent over and gave me a target I couldn’t resist. I had to do it! He was so mad that he pulled up a tree by the roots and chased me. I ran like hell.”

“One time I was teasing Leota at the dinner table. She was so mad that she threw her fork at me. It caught in my shirt so it looked like it stabbed me. Of course, I pretended I was hurt. Mom was really mad at Leota. (hee, hee!)”

Dad and his brother played football at East Peoria High. “The Dean brothers” were apparently quite a pair during games, according to opponents.

It was also during those years that his love of classical music was born.



The Dean-Post Family

After WWII, Dad returned to East Peoria and to his old job at Armour & Co. in Peoria. He was a bachelor who liked to party. It was at Armour where he met Lavina Post. She was a very pretty woman and a Sunday school teacher. His friends suggested that he ask her out.

“They said I should ask her out, but I said “Nah – that’s marrying stuff.”

He finally did ask her out. Their first date was flying. Both Dad and his brother were licensed small-plane pilots.

“She LOVED to fly. She wanted me to do all the loops and other tricks. She laughed the whole time we were in the air. We took you up when you were a baby, but you slept through it.”

They were madly in love with each other and married on August 16, 1947. They were together for over 60 years before Mom passed away in 2008. They loved each other as much in 2008 as they did in 1947 - it was a lifelong love that never lessened. Even when Mom's memory was robbed by dementia, she never forgot how much she loved him. He missed her terribly. If was like part of him was gone.



50th Anniversary, 1997

I was born nine months after their wedding. Dad doted on me, enjoying playing with me and protecting me. Mom complained

that he kept coming home with frilly little dresses for me, and then she had to iron them!

The protector part of him scared some people. Teachers and boys who wanted to date me were afraid of him. Of course, when I was a teenager, I couldn't stand his protection. We had words more than once, but I never won.

He was extremely proud of my accomplishments, especially when I completing graduate school and went to work at Stanford School of Medicine.

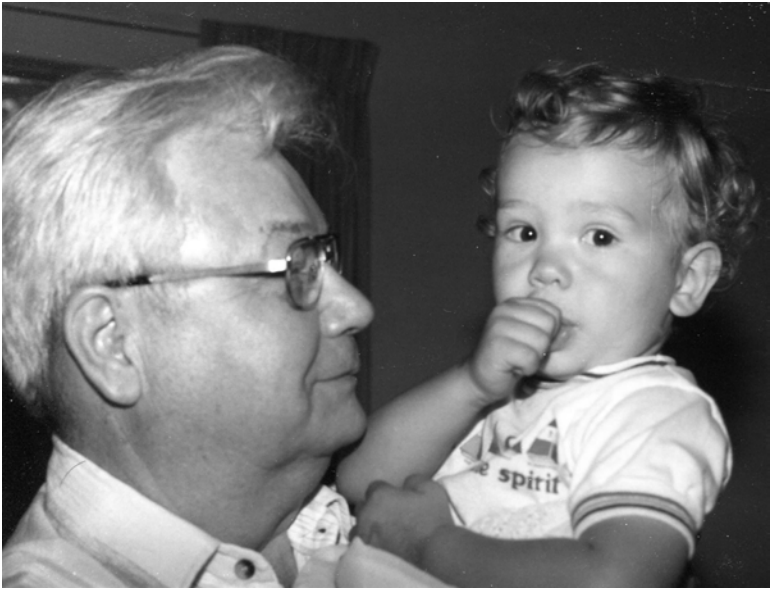


UC Davis, 1972

When I brought Lew home to meet Dad and Mom, Dad's heart probably sank. Dad's worst nightmare was that I'd end up with some "long-haired hippie", and Lew looked the part (so did I). Lew won him over, though. A couple of months before he died, he told me he thought Lew and I have what he and Mom had.



*“Your Mom and I never had to change one of those disposable diapers before and we weren’t sure how to do it. While we were trying to figure it out, the little stinker **laughed** at us!”*



He thoroughly enjoyed watching his only grandson, Michael, grow up. He was convinced that I would have a girl that he could spoil as he did me. He had to learn a whole new set of skills with a boy.



He was proud of Michael. Michael started to read very early, and he grew...and grew (he is now 6'3"). Just like his mom, Michael wasn't easily fooled.

"Gosh, that kid is BIG!"

There are others who regarded Dad as a father or grandfather, Lew being the most obvious.

Mom's nephew, Dave Morse, also saw dad as a father figure. Dad would roughhouse with him when he was young, and give him advice as he got older. Dave knew that Dad would always be there for him.

When Dave came to California to live with us when he was in his early 20s, their relationship strengthened. Dad called him "Sonny". They were always teasing each other. When they did the dishes together, you'd hear laughing and kidding coming from the kitchen.

"You clod...you're always chipping you teeth about something."

As always, the last telephone call Dad and Dave had together started with "You clod".

My best friend Julie Fuller and her kids called him "Dad #2" and "Grandpa #2". Julie and I were best friends since high school, so being part of each other's family was natural.

*"Hello, Miss **Yew-lie!** How are you?"*

When Julie and I were in college and sharing an apartment in Davis, there was one time we were on our way to Julie's house in Burlingame, and signals got crossed. They thought we would arrive in Burlingame at the time we said we were leaving Davis. Her dad, a cop, and my dad immediately put together a search party. Her dad started in Burlingame, and Dad started in Dixon, and they were to search I80 for us, meeting at the highway patrol

station in Vallejo. Julie's dad got the highway patrol on alert to watch for us. In spite of that, nobody saw us until we arrived in Burlingame. Both dads were furious with us (it wasn't our fault)!



1975

Classical Music

I grew up listening to opera on Sunday mornings. Early Sunday mornings. Endlessly. Loud.

I was not allowed to listen to rock and roll in our house.

Dad's passion for classical music was known to all who interacted with him, and he would share it with anyone who was interested (and some who were not).

He was a musician. He played principal French horn in chamber orchestras and symphony orchestras, beginning while he was still in high school. The music store asked him to demonstrate instruments for them.

"I did it for nothing. I probably should have been paid."

While in high school, he was first horn in a state-wide honor band that played at Chicago's Soldiers Field under John Philip Souza. As a Marine, he played in the San Diego Marine Corps Band, until Pearl Harbor changed his job description.

"There was a man who came to our house in Chicago. He had a saxophone with him. I made him to leave it on the porch. No saxophones or accordions are allowed in my house!"

He knew a lot about classical music, and he had an extensive collection of records and CDs. He would have been an excellent classical music appreciation teacher.

He made mix tapes for friends and acquaintances, tailoring each one to the person and his or her interests. He loved to do it.

“When we lived in Burlingame, I got a call asking me to join the Peninsula Symphony Orchestra. Do you know who called me? Shirley Temple Black! I don’t know how she heard about me.”

When his sister Bee’s three girls were young, he introduced music to them with a recording of “Peter and the Wolf” by Prokofiev. He taught them the instruments’ sounds by those used for each animal in the narrated recording. He did it again with Michael.

His music nourished him. It helped him through good times and bad. It was an essential part of his soul. Thank God that his hearing remained sharp for his entire life.

The Marine Corps



Dad didn't always think he would join the Marine Corps. When he was in high school, he wanted to go to Annapolis. Appointments to the military academies, however, could only be conferred by members of Congress.

Pop and great-uncle Johnnie were both involved in local politics, and local politicians would visit the house. They were friends with their district's congressman. I know that Everett Dirksen (eventually the Minority Leader of the U.S. Senate) had visited their house, but I'm not sure if he was congressman at the time Dad wanted an appointment or the guy before him.

Dad was unable to get his appointment because it would look like favoritism if he were

appointed. The congressman was a family friend.

In 1941, before the United States joined the War, he saw the writing on the wall and went to the Navy recruitment office to enlist. The recruiter did not do well, because he left and went across the street to the Marine Corps recruitment office and signed up.

“Right after I enlisted, my draft notice came in the mail. I took the notice to the Marine recruiter and asked what I should do. He took it and wrote ‘Ha, ha! We got him first’ across it”

He went to basic training at El Toro Marine Base near San Diego. In September, after he had completed basic training, his mother died and he got leave to return to Peoria for her funeral.

He remembered December 7, 1941, vividly. The sirens went off and the base went on alert. Marines went to battle stations. Planes filled the sky, ready to attack any enemy bombers that might invade the mainland. At that point, they didn’t know if there was also going to be an attack on the west coast.

He didn’t talk much about the War, at least not about the battles. He was in some of the bloodiest battles in the Pacific, most notably Tarawa and Saipan.

“When we were on our way to Saipan, we were being chased for days by an enemy submarine. The sub ran our ship up on a reef and we started to sink. I was the officer on deck at that day. The

Captain told me to sound the abandon ship order. 'NOW HEAR THIS. NOW HEAR THIS. ALL HANDS TO BATTLE STATIONS. ALL HANDS TO BATTLE STATIONS. THIS IS NO DRILL.'

That was the most scared I was in my entire life. When we went over the side and were in the water, we were sitting ducks for the sub. Luckily, one of our subchasers got him first.

We were lost for a couple of weeks, so we missed the hottest part of the battle on Saipan."

When the WWII memorial was to be dedicated in Washington, I made plans for Dad, Michael, Aunt Bee and me to attend. About a week or so later, he called me to ask if we could please not go. He said it was bringing back too many bad memories, and he hadn't been able to sleep. Of course, we cancelled the plans to go, but we did add his picture and biography to the Memorial Registry.

He did talk about the good times. There were four buddies that stuck together. I heard the most about Bob Cassin and "Rebel". They kept in touch for their lifetimes.

"Bob Cassin was my bosom buddy. The best friend anyone could ask for."

When Dad and Mom got married, they honeymooned in Minneapolis/St. Paul, where the Cassins lived.



Second row, right

“After New Caledonia was secured, we liked to swim in a fresh water pool on the island. One time we were on our way there, and heard ‘HALT’ from the bushes. We thought they were enemy that we missed. We thought we were dead.

A group of Navajo code-talkers came out of the bushes. They were training. ‘You did not see us. We are not here,’ and then they were gone.”

There was another story about that swimming hole. Every time he told it, he laughed so hard he almost couldn’t get it out.

“We were skinny-dipping at the swimming hole. I swam down deep (snicker), and came up under Cassin and (snicker, snicker) pinched him you-

know-where. (ha, ha, ha) He breached out of the water like a (ha, ha, ha, snort, ha, ha) dolphin!”

He also talked about the time the Marines spent in New Zealand, where they were celebrated by the locals. New Zealand and Australia were in danger of being invaded by the Japanese. He fell in love with New Zealand and its people.

*“The Maori are beautiful people...**beautiful** people.”*

While in Christchurch, some of the locals invited him for meals in their homes. When they learned of his musical abilities, one of the local musicians took him to Christchurch Cathedral to climb around inside the pipe organ, and to attend concerts.

Other stories were from the time the Marines came to Hawaii’s Big Island after the horrors of Tarawa. They built a camp on the Parker Ranch, called Camp Tarawa, where they rested and trained for the Saipan invasion.

*“Parker Ranch was a huge cattle ranch. They gave us some of the **best** steak and eggs!”*

“I was on shore patrol on the Kona side, when a distressed woman ran up to us and motioned for us to come with her. She didn’t speak English.

She took us to her house and to her bathroom, where her husband was huddled and cowering in the bathtub. There was a swabby

sitting in the bathroom, stinking drunk, watching the guy take a bath! We hauled him off.”

When I visited the Big Island in 2010, I made a point of visiting Parker Ranch. The locals built a monument at the site of Camp Tarawa to honor the Marines.



When I visited Oahu, he made another request, and he was very serious about it.

“When you visit Pearl Harbor, salute the Arizona for me. A lot of Marines are down there.”

I don’t know the first thing about saluting, but I did it, feeling a bit foolish. When I saw Dad after that, he asked me if I had done it.

“Once a Marine, always a Marine.”

He is greatly missed.



Semper Fi

One day, Dad went to Safeway and saw several Marines, probably members of an honor guard, in dress uniform purchasing lunch. As he passed, he uttered “Semper Fi!” There is no such thing as a “former” Marine. Once a Marine, always a Marine. He was a living example.

The Marines asked Dad about his service in WWII, where he participated in battles at Tarawa, Saipan, and Tinian, among others. They chatted for a bit, and Dad went on to do his shopping.

As he left the store, the Marines were at the door. They snapped to attention and saluted him, living up to the Marine Corps motto, “Semper Fi!”



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