

Chapter I: Neal-Habicht

Last Revised: November 22, 2013

I was born in Mt. Carmel Hospital¹ in Detroit, Michigan, at 9:42 in the morning on October 5, 1940. My sister, Joan, had been born in Detroit on August 10, 1932. We are the children of **CHARLES GLENN NEAL**² and **IRENE LOUISE {HABICHT} NEAL**.³ We will examine the origins and families of my father and mother in due course, but it might be useful to profile here the main features of their lives as adults in order to round out this narrative of my sister and myself – who share the history that follows.

Our parents had been married in Detroit on June 1, 1927. They lived near Grand River Boulevard in Detroit, then at at least four other locations on the west side of Detroit (15469 Wark⁴ Avenue, an upper flat at 10324 Orangelawn Avenue, Apartment 206 at

¹ This hospital (now Grace Hospital) is located at 6071 Outer Drive at Schaeffer Highway in Detroit.

² The Neal name could be English, Scotch-Irish, or Irish. (It could even be French, for there were Huguenots named DeNeel who after coming to America simplified the spelling .) The spellings Neal, O’Neal, and MacNeal or McNeal all are found among the Scotch-Irish, although the usual spelling among them tends to be either Neil or Neill; the O’Neal spelling is generally Irish. All forms of the name appear to be rooted in the Gaelic or Celtic name Niall, which, according to one informed researcher, “is usually translated as ‘champion’ and traces back to the ancient high kings of Ireland. In Scotland, several Highland clans trace descent from Niall of the Nine Hostages, including the MacNeils who also take their name from that line. MacNeils recognize any Neal spelling as probably related whether it is English, Irish, or Scottish. Neal may also indicate an English family name that goes back for hundreds of years in England. Most likely, even those names came over from Ireland or Scotland. There may or may not have been a Mc, Mac, or O’ dropped from the name.” As we shall see as our story unfolds, it is increasingly likely that the Neals we are researching here were Irish when they first came to America and were in fact O’Neals, but we cannot be certain about their ultimate origins until DNA evidence clarifies this matter.

³ Original surnames of married women are generally included in {braces}.

⁴ Wark Avenue no longer bears that name. Based on the streets listed on the 1930 census and those shown on a modern map, Wark Avenue was renamed either Santa Rosa or San Juan. There is an outside chance that “Wark” in the city directory is a misprint for Ward Street or an abbreviation for Warwick Avenue: both of those are also located near Grand River Avenue on Detroit’s west side, but Wark Avenue is probably the correct name of the street my parents lived on.

13115 Sorrento Avenue, and 8103 Robson Avenue) and another in Dearborn just over the line dividing it and Detroit (7404 Kentucky Street). All of these residences were fairly close together. I do not know the dates my parents lived in each of these places, or even in what sequence they lived in them, but at the time of the 1930 census, my parents were lodgers at 5038 Ridgewood Avenue.⁵ They lived at the Orangelawn address at the time of the 1930-31 city directory and at least through August 1932, when my sister was born. About 1935 or 1936, they moved west to 30149 Beechwood Avenue in nearby Garden City, Michigan – whether as owners or renters I do not know.⁶

A year or two before I was born, my parents went back to Detroit, buying a house at 9566 Mansfield Avenue just north of West Chicago Road in the same general area as their previous places on Detroit's west side. It was this house into which I was born.⁷ On the day after V-J Day, August 15, 1945, the four of us moved to 18421 Meridian Road, Grosse Ile, Michigan. We had been scheduled to move the day before but had to

⁵ Four of the addresses are listed in Detroit's city directories for 1926-27 through 1934; the Ridgewood address is shown only on the 1930 census. Both it and the Sorrento address are now immediately adjacent to the I-96 freeway. The other two addresses were found in my parents' records.

⁶ The house in Garden City was one block north of Ford Road west of Merriman Road; although Garden City had been incorporated in 1933, the house may have been in Dearborn at the time, as the 1935 Detroit city directory lists them as residing in Dearborn. See slide 10463 (taken in 2003) for a view of the site, which appears to have a later house on it. Also see the United States Geological Survey (USGS) map for Inkster/Michigan. I have dozens of the USGS maps in my files, and on them are marked many of the identifiable locations mentioned in this family history.

⁷ Orangelawn runs east and west quite near to Mansfield, and this proximity might help to explain the move to the latter street. Incidentally, the name of the cross street at the north end of our block of Mansfield (West Chicago being at the south end) was Elmira.

postpone because by chance it was the day World War II ended. I lived in this house until I went away to college in the fall of 1958.⁸

The 1940 census reveals that the house at 9566 Mansfield was valued at \$5,300, about average for those listed on this census sheet. My father had worked as an order clerk for a steel manufacturer (unnamed, but Great Lakes Steel) all fifty-two weeks of the previous year, and at forty hours per week; his salary was \$2,400, a little higher than average for the employed men shown on that census sheet. My mother is listed as having been employed in housework, as was almost every other woman shown on this particular census sheet.

My father was born and raised in Indiana except for a period of five and one half years (1917 through early 1922) during which his family lived in Portland, Maine. When he resumed his high school education at Union High School⁹ in Dugger, Indiana, in 1922, my father – Glenn to his classmates – quickly became known for his humor, especially his touch with amusing cartoons. He was a member of the literary society and in the casts of at least two school plays. His ambition, the 1924 high school yearbook said, was

⁸ After selling the house on Grosse Ile, my parents moved first to an apartment in Trenton, Michigan (late 1960s); then to a house at 7322 M-50 Highway in Onsted, Michigan (early 1970s); and finally to an apartment at 2013 Medford in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Following my father's death, my mother lived in other apartments in Ann Arbor and then in a nursing home not far from her childhood home in Dearborn.

⁹ This school had been created in 1922 with the consolidation of the previous Dugger and Cass Township high schools; at one time it was the largest consolidated township high school in the state of Indiana. See slide 12036, taken in 2006.

to become a doctor, but his thirty-two classmates evidently expected him to become a journalist instead.

My father left his parents' home the night of his high school graduation from Union High School in 1924. He went to Bloomington, Indiana, where he worked over the summer at the Showers Brothers Furniture Company¹⁰ until he became desperately ill with typhoid and malaria. He managed to get home but nearly died and was slow to recover. His dream of attending college at an end, in 1925 he moved up to Detroit (as many young people did during the 1920s) in search of work. Here he lived on Forest Avenue, near the corner of Grand River and 14th Street, rooming with a friend at the home of the pastor of the West Side Church of Christ, Brother Claude Witty.

As his recorded reminiscences relate in detail, my father held an astonishing variety of short-term jobs (none of which he was qualified for or good at). The list of them is too long to recite here but included jobs at the Gemmer Manufacturing Company, with Sebastian Kresge at the Kresge store in downtown Detroit, at Cartwright Gloves across from Navin Field (later Tiger Stadium), and at numerous automobile plants: Packard, Fisher Body, Budd, Hudson, Cadillac, Continental, and Dodge Truck. He also worked as a housepainter.

¹⁰ At that time, this company was the world's largest manufacturer of bedroom furniture. Located at 11th and Morton Streets, it had about 1,000 employees. It went out of business during the 1950s, but some of the buildings are still being used by Indiana University. See slide 12061 for how these buildings appeared in 2006. My father also remembered doing some of the construction work on the University's then-new stadium, which has since been replaced.

Sometime during the late 1920s, my father went to school to become a bookkeeper and held at least two jobs where his title showed that he was using his skills in that field. He was out of work for awhile in 1932 and 1933, during which time he, my mother, and my sister went to live in Kentucky. In mid-1933 my father landed a position as clerk with Great Lakes Steel Corporation in Ecorse, an industrial suburb of Detroit.¹¹ He worked for Great Lakes (later part of National Steel Corporation of Pittsburgh) until he retired during the 1970s. His work there was primarily in sales, and then in sales forecasting, although during his later years he also assisted the president of the company.

My mother was raised in Ashtabula, Ohio, until 1911 or 1912, when her family moved to Dearborn, Michigan, then a community of about a thousand inhabitants. Here she went to school, first in a one-room schoolhouse a mile from home (in a hamlet then called Wallaceville) and then at the high school.¹² She was a member of the French Club, a soprano in the Glee Club, and a cast member of one school play. She evidently was

¹¹ According to Detroit's city directories for 1926-27 through 1935, my father was first an embosser at Embossagraph Company at 4430 Woodward Avenue, then secretary-treasurer of the Embossed Display Card Company (9046 Alpine Street, not far from home), and then bookkeeper at E.A. Ross Company (a manufacturer of grinding wheels located at 4615 Woodward Avenue). The 1930 census shows him as a bookkeeper again, perhaps at a bee hive supply company, more likely the Bee Line Supply Company, or possibly the Bee Hive Restaurant at 7751 Hamilton in Detroit – the enumerator's handwriting is difficult to read. Although he is listed as a bookkeeper in the last of the city directories, no employing firm is shown, which is consistent with my sister's recollection that he was out of work at about this time. My sister remembers that with his first paycheck from Great Lakes Steel he bought her a doll for her first birthday (August 1933).

¹² The Wallaceville School still stands, at 8050 North Gully Road in Hines Park. See slides 10469 and 10470 and the USGS map for Inkster/Michigan. The high school, built in 1917, was on Mason between Garrison and Morley. See slides 10478 and 10479 and the USGS map for Dearborn/Michigan for views of the site. These photographs were taken in 2003. The 1920 census shows Irene Habicht attending school.

known to her twenty classmates as quite a dancer – and as someone who liked to laugh and to make others laugh.

During her high school years my mother worked as a live-in maid (or perhaps what we would today term an au pair) in a number of homes in Detroit and Dearborn in return for her room and board. Some of the families she worked for were friends of Henry Ford (a neighbor of sorts in Dearborn), and Edsel Ford may have been one of the youngsters she took care of. After graduating from high school in Dearborn in 1924, my mother took a job as stenographer for Nelson, Baker Company, a chemical manufacturer in Detroit, and lived at 1409 Pingree Street.¹³ Next she held a secretarial position in a brokerage firm, Whittlesey McLean and Company, on the 20th floor of the Penobscot Building in downtown Detroit. She was employed there again during the Depression.¹⁴

Two years after marrying, in 1929, my mother lost her left arm above the elbow as a result of an automobile accident near Hazard, Kentucky: the automobile she was driving overturned, her arm became gangrenous (this was before antibiotics, it should be remembered), and her arm was amputated as the only way of saving her life. It is sobering to reflect upon the fact that both of my parents came very close to dying quite young.

¹³ Nelson, Baker was located at 1301-1331 Lafayette Boulevard.

¹⁴ The Whittlesey McLean and Company was located at 2016 Penobscot Building. She is listed as this firm's bookkeeper in the 1930-31 Detroit city directory (though not in the other two directories).