

## Ray Chatfield

My father died in January 1970. I remember and think about him frequently, sometimes daily. Even as I write this short essay, floods of disconnected memories nearly overwhelm me, sometimes evoking a sigh or a chuckle, and sometimes even a sense of personal shame.

Because I had left home at such an early age, never to return except for an occasional visit, I had become emotionally detached from my father, and as he lay dying in the hospital, gasping for his final breath, I could not bear to sit at his bedside and watch him die. I stayed outside the door in the hospital hallway, allowing my mother and one of their best friends, Father Pat O'Neill, to support his final moments. Even at the very end of his life, before he lapsed into a coma, he was asking his attorney to make a last-minute adjustment in his will for the sake of helping my mother, or so he hoped.

My dad was not a complex person; he spoke straight to the point, offered no subtlety to temper his opinions, and was afraid of no one. He told me of an incident that happened after he landed his crop-dusting airplane at a small private airport in Colusa County. As he got out of the cockpit and walked toward the makeshift terminal, the owner of the landing strip burst out of his office, ran toward my father, and shouted at him to leave. He accused my father of being a business competitor, and he would not allow him to use his landing strip. He had to take his plane someplace else. My father responded with a quick blow to the jaw, knocking his competitor to the ground, and continued on his way, leaving the man lying semi-conscious on the tarmac.

My mother told me of an incident at a college football stadium in Stockton, when a fan got on my father's case and began to make fun of him because he was so public and vocal in cheering his team on. My dad took this verbal abuse for a while, as my mother kept shushing him to remain calm and ignore it. But as the abuse continued unabated, my father got up from his seat, walked over to his sarcastic critic, and knocked him unconscious with a single punch.

I have no recollection of seeing my father act belligerently or threaten to fight another person, but from an early age, I knew that he should never be provoked. He was quick-tempered and fearless.

I did witness my father's participation in one of the most foolhardy and terrifying stunts imaginable, and I shudder now, 58 years later, as I relate the incident. I went deer hunting with my father when I was 12 years old. It was a complete disaster. My first day out, walking in the mountainous area, I got separated from the other hunters, and even though it lasted for a very short time, I panicked and became disoriented. I was terrified. At that moment, I realized I was not cut out to participate in the manly ritual of deer hunting.

In the late afternoon, after the day's hunt, my father, a fellow hunter, and I drove to a large cabin not far from where we had camped. I cannot remember why we went there, but I do remember my father and his friend had been drinking. Whatever the purpose of the visit, I remember my dad's friend standing on the porch of the cabin with his deer rifle in hand and my father standing in the driveway near the pine trees. My father placed a beer bottle on his head and invited the deer hunter to shoot it off the top of his head. The hunter hesitated for a moment, raised his rifle to his shoulder, and pointed it at my dad. The terrifying silence was shattered by the explosion from the rifle, the sound echoing through the mountains. The bottle shattered and my father stood still as a statue. The hunter lowered the rifle and said, "You didn't have to worry; I aimed high." I was stunned. I could not speak; I felt like crying but dared not. I felt sorry for my father and sorry that I had participated in what I had just witnessed. On the way home after the deer hunt, he told me not to say anything to my mother about the shooting incident lest she worry. I didn't. For the past 47 years, I have not said a word to anyone.

My father dropped out of high school at the end of his freshman year and went to work. Throughout his life, he moved from career to career, looking for financial stability, looking to use his God-given talents, and looking to prove himself. When he married in 1933, he was working as a home heating oil delivery and repairman. Later he went to work for an agricultural implement supply company to collect on the debts owed by farmers, and from there to a national manufacturer of rice harvesters, doing the same kind of work. He managed a rice ranch for an absentee landlord from San Francisco. He went into business for himself, traveling with a harvester combine throughout California and Arizona, doing contract harvesting for farmers. He opened a construction business, manufactured concrete blocks for home construction, and served as a general contractor to build homes

using his product. He bought an airplane, learned to fly, and opened a crop-dusting business. He sold warehouse dryers throughout California, Arizona, and Mexico, and he sold crop pesticides. In 1950, he and my mother relocated to Sacramento, where he found a job as a parts department manager for an agricultural supply house. Encouraged by one of his neighbors, he went to work selling commercial real estate and specialized in selling agricultural land on the fringes of Sacramento that would someday be needed for urban development. This work led him to the development and management of urban warehouse properties for his own investment and those of his clients.

Never sick a day in his life, he was stricken with pancreatic cancer and died at the age of 56. Shortly before his death, he told me he had no complaints about the shortness of his life. "I've lived a full life," he said. "I am satisfied."