

Chapter 3

EARLY BOYHOOD 1921-1929

*“Look down my rain barrel,
Slide down my cellar door,
And we’ll be jolly friends
Forevermore.”*

Playmates - Saxie Dowell

i - East Side, West Side

From the time I was a baby, my mother went out to work. The first job I was aware of was at Lasky’s clothing store down town not far from where we lived. I made up a little song, a parody, which the adults at the house said was cute, but which may have been a genuine lament over my six-day-a-week separation from my mother. It went

*My bonnie lies over the ocean,
My bonnie lies down Lasky’s store.
My bonnie lies over the ocean,
Oh bring back my bonnie once more.*

But at least by working in the retail district, Mother was able to keep up with fashion trends and take advantage of sales. If I had little else, I was a well-dressed youngster. Playing in the mud or dirt, I could be just as grimy and scruffy as any little boy. For school, however, and for church, birthday parties and Grandma Wallace’s on Sundays, Mother dolled me up “fit to kill.” When I was quite small, I had a velvet Little Lord Fauntleroy suit for special occasions. Mother must have loved it; about 70 years later when she died, it was still in tissue paper in her dresser drawer. When I was a little older, there were things she made me wear that I didn’t approve of. For one, my belted tweed coat, which I thought was “sissy” and I demonstrated that opinion by sailing its matching cap into Wills Creek when we crossed the bridge one

Sunday morning on the way to church. And I hated my shoes that had to be high enough “to support your ankles;” I was never allowed dirty, sloppy, loose sneakers. I didn’t stop wearing those high shoes until I developed an infection on one foot from the shoe’s friction. Nevertheless, Mother strongly believed in the importance of looking nice and she didn’t mind spending perhaps more than she could afford on her son’s appearance.

No, Mother certainly didn’t neglect me. Being away from me during the day, she overcompensated at home by not letting me out of her sight. Whenever possible, it was she who ministered to my needs. Before I could do for myself, she got me ready for the day before she left for work in the morning. In winter in our frigid house she stood me on a chair in front of the coal-burning kitchen stove and got me dressed. It must have been frustrating for her at times: I was a finicky kid, insisting on having NO lumps where my socks were pulled over my long johns! (After all, my legs still hung out below my short pants or knickers.) Then off she would go, leaving me in the care of Ma and Jeanette.

In the evening I returned to Mother’s care and close attention. Often she would let me play near her in the cellar while she scrubbed clothes on a corrugated washboard in a big metal tub.

Often Mother would entertain me by playing the popular song-hit recordings she brought home from down town. “*Yes, sir, she’s my baby - No, sir, I don’t mean maybe.*” “*Yes, we have no bananas - We have no bananas today.*” “*Pack up all my care and woe, here I go, singing low - Bye Bye, Blackbird.*” “*Charleston*” was the tune to which the young crowd did the Twenties dance craze of the same name. Mother would play the record and do her version of the dance and I would try to imitate her. And so forever will this line remain in the folklore of my babyhood, quoted every time the subject of my dancing comes up: “*Why, Billy could dance The Charleston before he could walk!*”



Jeanette Rohrer (left) and Kathryn Wallace Rohrer in the backyard of the big house on Baltimore Avenue. That’s CWR (Billy) lurking under the grape arbor. Circa 1925

Sunday was different. Mother had me then for the whole day. In my early years, Daddy and Mother sometimes took me to her parents', the Wallaces', home on the West Side. When I was a little older, Mother would take me to Mass, show me off afterwards, then proceed down Fayette Street hill to Wallaces, where we spent the rest of the day. Though happy enough in my familiar surroundings on Baltimore Avenue, on the East Side, with my playmate and the grandmother and aunt I felt so comfortable with, I dearly loved to go to Grandma Wallace's.

Grandma was warm and gentle, not the hugging and kissing type, but clearly loving. Pop was strict - to raise nine children he had to be - and often gruff, but he too had a warm side. He didn't pay much attention to me when I was young, except when I was bad, but even then he only chastised me verbally and told my mother that she had better use the hairbrush!

Mother's siblings still living at home were Bud (Francis), Margaret, Dorothy, Madelyn and Regina. They must have liked me, or at least tolerated me, for I have only happy memories of being among them in those early years.

One of my earliest memories of Sundays at Grandma's is the time the family kitty eluded my torments by running into the sewer. But nobody besides me had seen what happened, so after that, it was always: "*Billy, do you remember when you threw the cat into the sewer?*"

The next five years hold memories of Sundays at Grandma's which I cannot associate with any particular age.

Ah, the memory of Sunday dinners! The grand weekly feast was at midday. Nine of us squeezed around the kitchen table, or, when any of the other Wallace children came for dinner, extension leaves were added to the dining room table - where we were similarly squeezed. Sometimes there were so many that we ate in two shifts. Grace was said in unison. *Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts...* The meal was almost predictable: chicken, fried or roasted, or beef *and* pork roast, always with mashed potatoes, kraut, cole slaw and homemade bread, plus homemade cake (usually yellow cake with chocolate icing) or fruit pie. Kids' chatter was permitted, as long as it didn't get too loud, but serious conversation, even on the part of the parents and adult children, and humor were largely lacking. We were there to eat, period. Pop was not fastidious, but one rule he did enforce: no elbows on the table, especially to support the head. "*What's the matter, is your head heavy?!*"

After dinner I would go out to play. But not before my Mother's inevitable command: "*Now go upstairs and get those good clothes off, Billy. You ruin that outfit and you won't get another one any time soon!*" She didn't quite mean that. She had to soften her extravagance a little in front of her thrifty parents.

Play at first was riding my tricycle. Somewhat later, I learned to roller skate: I started by coasting a few feet down the slightly graded sidewalk, then a few feet more and so on, until finally, after many Sundays' trials, I experienced the thrill of making it to the end of the block without stopping! I never did graduate to a two-wheeled bike. But not many young kids in those days had one.

Taking pictures was often a pleasant diversion on sunny Sunday afternoons. Mother and "the girls" to look their best would still be wearing their church clothes. Sometimes they would take turns being snapped in a coat or bathing suit that one of them had just acquired. I was always included in the picture-taking and more often than not I "hammed it up." Then there were the hikes on nearby Haystack Mountain which Mother and two or more of my aunts took and I tagged along.

During summer vacations, I sometimes went swimming with my Wallace relatives in Patterson Creek, about ten miles away across the state line in West Virginia. Every year we rode the street car the two miles to the church picnic at Narrows Park, where we went on the roller coaster and merry-go-round and watched the organized games. Later, Blue Beach on the south branch of the Potomac River near Springfield, West Virginia, twenty or so miles from Cumberland, was the Wallaces' favorite place for family outings, memorable events if only for Grandma Wallace's wonderful food. On one, perhaps two, occasions I was included in the annual weekend at the cottage of Uncle Georgie (my grandmother Wallace's brother), also on the south branch. The car ride to get there was fun, but after arriving I wished I didn't have to remain! The foul-smelling outhouse, the long walk through a cornfield to go swimming in the muddy river and the dusty, corn-husk mattresses that aggravated my hayfever and asthma were not my idea of fun.

For the most part, I felt very contented in the midst of my mother's folks. I was equally contented at home on Baltimore Avenue. Ma and Jeanette took good care of me, coping well enough, I suppose, with my bratty tendencies. Ma had a soft, comfortable lap and she spoiled me with sweets and was easy on me when I was bad. Jeanette on the contrary was skinny and angular and quick to smack my bottom.

I often sat in the midst of adult discussions, or more than likely *gossip* sessions, which Jeanette dominated. Amused by my absorption, she would wink at the others and say, "*Billy, is the conversation good today?*" I doubt if I understood anything that was said but adult attitudes undoubtedly rubbed off and went into the formation of my personality. How much influence Jeanette actually had on my early upbringing is not easy to determine. I only know that she was good to me and I had a great deal of affection for her.

So I suppose I can say that I had two pretty good worlds, one on the east side of town and one on the west.

ii - Daddy

But the *east*-side world could have been better. There was one serious deficiency: I lacked a full-time father!

Not long after we moved from the third floor to the second, Daddy no longer slept in the same room with Mother. In 1928 or thereabouts he was occupying one of the smaller rooms on the second floor. It was there he taught me the rudiments of the ukelele when I was seven or eight. *Oh, dem golden slippers* went one of my songs.

When I was a little older, Daddy would let me go by myself to Richardson's drug store a couple blocks away to return the novels he had rented from the lending library and to buy a half dozen candy bars for the two of us. (That's when I must have acquired my sweet tooth.) The books from Richardson's were probably current novels but the only title I remember was *Scaramouche* by Rafael Sabattini. Daddy said there was a lot of action in it and thought I would enjoy reading it when I was a little older. I did read it eventually.

Daddy had a bit of talent for drawing. He once made a pen-and-ink copy of the great seal of Maryland, which I needed for school. (I still have it, framed and hanging in our family room.) It is possible that he studied graphic design: I remember later coming across a textbook of his from which I taught myself to print fancy capital letters.

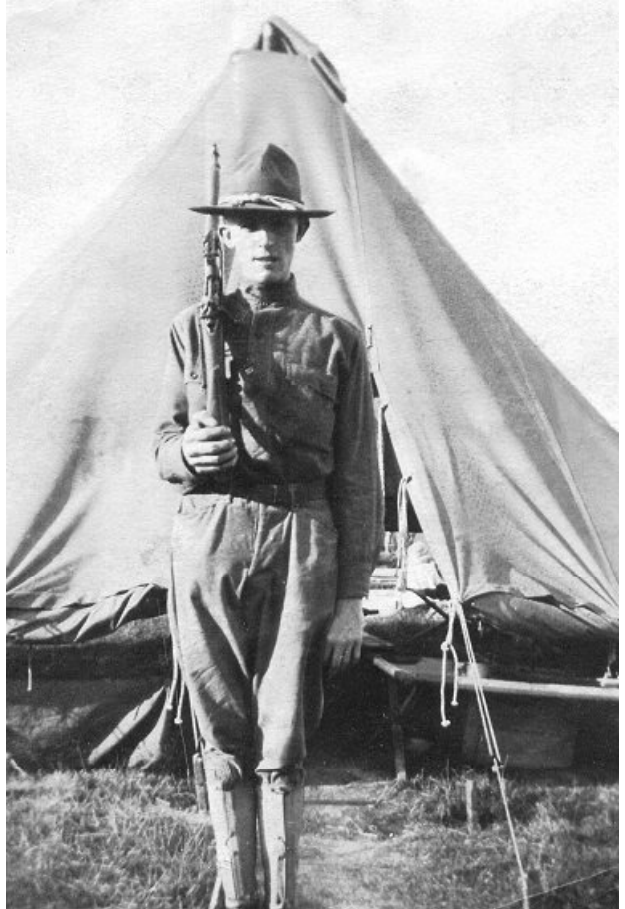
My father did not have an automobile but friends took Mother and him riding and occasionally they took me along. One day in the country they stopped to let me see some cows up close. Sometime later my mother was having a little trouble combing my hair and blamed it on my "cowlick." I asked what that meant and my father said, "I guess that day in the country one of those cows stuck her head into the car and licked your hair!" For years I was sure that was exactly what happened.

Once Daddy took me on a weekend outing with the family of one of his former Army buddies. I don't think I enjoyed it very much; I was not avid for the outdoors, in part because of my allergies. Furthermore, I was uncomfortable because my mother had been reluctant to let me go since it meant missing Sunday Mass. Daddy was just trying to be a dad, I suppose.

We were talking in my father's room one day and he asked me what I wanted

to be when I grew up. I had no idea. “Maybe you could join the Civil Service,” he suggested. I didn’t know what Civil Service was, but as it turned out I did exactly that.

For a time my father installed store window displays for Chesterfield cigarettes. He made posies and fancy streamers using colored crepe paper, arranging them to draw the eye to intricately stacked fake cigarette packages and to a poster with an advertising message. In 1932 or 1933, he operated a small candy store on Queen City Pavement. In the “back room,” there was an off-the-track horse race gambling operation (called “bookmaking” then), which was illegal at that time. I went there once or twice and Dad gave me candy bars. I like to believe that my father did not own the store but simply managed it. Indeed, it is unlikely that he could have acquired enough capital to invest in such an enterprise. The whole thing folded early on. My father’s next job, and last, was that of insurance agent.



Charles Webster Rohrer, CWR’s father, in World War I, 1917.

These isolated memories of my father I had to dig deep to retrieve. All told, he and I spent very little time together. And yet, he apparently made some mark on me! I’ve been a dabbler in music all my life and the ukelele was among my early musical influences. While not creatively artistic, I do have a modicum of ability in graphic presentation. I suppose my father’s love of reading had a positive influence on me although I have never been the avid reader that he impressed me as being. When Dad was in the sanatorium for tuberculars, he was involved with a newsletter, indicating a penchant for written communication. I, too, have often worked on editorial projects both in my job and by avocation.

My father gave me certain physical characteristics as well: light hair, fair complexion, blue eyes, slight build (at least one of his Army buddies called him “Little Bit”) and short stature (he was five-six but I am all of five-seven-and-a-half!).

One thing I would just as soon not have inherited: my father's hayfever allergies! Then there's that sweet tooth.

My father did make at least an effort to keep in touch with me. In 1933 he sent me a Christmas card signed simply "Daddy." At Christmas 1934, the year prior to his death, he underlined the words "memories tender and true" in the printed verse and signed the card "Dad" - after all, his son was now thirteen. And he may have sensed the end.

iii - Playing and Growing

In my eleven years at the house on Baltimore Avenue, I enjoyed a happy, active play life.

As a toddler, I had most of the usual toys, such as a kiddy car (a small tricycle pushed with the feet), a stuffed monkey called Nip, and April, a black and white kitten. When a couple years older, I had a dog whose name I don't recall but which my father said was a rat terrier.

From an early age, my first playmate to share the big Rohrer yard was our next-door neighbor's boy, Alan Trevaskis. Alan's father was Dr. Richard Trevaskis, who "brought you into this world" (Mother's second revelation regarding my beginnings). Alan was about a year older than I and naturally took the lead in our relationship. I can still hear him, standing at the bottom of our back steps, singing out, "Hey, Bill-ee." And I would run out and play whatever he decided.

Making mud pies was one of our amusements that made a lasting mark: One day, executing my usual water gopher assignment, I tripped on the stone steps coming out of the cellar, broke the water glass I was carrying and slashed my wrist at the base of the palm. They carried me across the street to Doctor Koon (why not next door to Doctor Trevaskis?), who patched me up. The scar is now quite faint, but it won't let me forget my first injury.

We didn't often play in Trevaskis's yard. It was undoubtedly discouraged because the doctor had his office on the yard side of the residence and the sight and sounds of kids might detract from the desired professional atmosphere. Besides, that yard was the province of the older Trevaskis children, Ruth and Richard, who by then were well trained. I do not imply that the Trevaskis domain was entirely off limits. I remember, probably when I was a good bit older, calling Alan from *his* back steps, and going into his kitchen for a drink of water, but not to play. (We didn't play in *our* house, either.)

(Incidentally, the Trevaskis house was the twin of the Rohrer house and was built by the same contractor. However, Dr. Trevaskis was not the original owner of his house.)

Mrs. Trevaskis was a dignified, soft, roundish woman with a cultivated way of talking. She was a pianist and at one period was giving lessons to Alan. Sometimes she let me watch during the lessons and I was duly impressed, for I had taken a few lessons (from another teacher) and had got nowhere. I suppose she was a good and understanding soul and had forgiven me for cussing her out a few years before when she called me down for some transgression - justifiably, I'm sure. She lived to be 100.

I was about five when my cousin, Pershing Rohrer, about seven-and-a-half, came to live at the big house. It was then I began to have more fun indoors. Now I could whisper secrets to another kid and giggle with him about the adults. In a little singsong, which let everyone know it was just a game, we would comment on our elders' peculiarities:

“Ma always sings her church songs.”

“Grandpap always wears *that* coat on Sundays.”

“Nets (Aunt Jeanette) always says ‘Heavenly Father’.”

Also “set to music” was our unconventional ways of coming down the polished front steps - backwards, for example, or on our bottoms. We would sing *Oh, let's go down this way*, pretending it was the first time. Another jingle was *Butter first and then molasses, please* - the way we wanted our bread to be spread for dessert.

Outdoors, Pershing took over the playtime leadership because he was older than Alan. Our games now became more sophisticated and somewhat organized. Pershing lost no time recruiting a few other neighborhood boys so we could play cowboys.

One of the older boys would call out, “Let's play cowboys. I'm TOM MIX!”

Herb: “BUCK JONES!”

Alan: “HOOT GIBSON!”

Billy: “I guess I have to be Fred Thompson again.”

Tom, Buck and Hoot were the big movie stars then, so little Billy, youngest

and least assertive of the neighborhood band, had to take what was left. If I got to be a cowboy at all! If the scenario of the day (modeled on some movie) demanded, Billy had to be THE GIRL that the leading cowboy rescued. There's a snapshot of Pershing carrying me and I am in some sort of girl's outfit and holding a doll. Humiliation!

Pershing developed a game we called "Follow That Man." In the role of detective chief, he would say, "Alan, follow the next man you see and report back here in 15 minutes." Alan, with paper and pencil in hand, keeping a prescribed distance, would then "pursue" the next man who walked past the house, usually in the direction of the business district. When the man went into a store or building, the pursuit was over and the detective came back to headquarters and reported what he had observed. I don't think our parents were too happy with that game. *"You never know what some man might do to you if he catches you spying on him."*

We could be creative, too. In the all-purpose area of the Rohrer backyard, we made a miniature golf course. A load of old lumber from under the back porch was put to good use for the alleys of each green and we designed obstacles, traps, tunnels, etc. Which one of us had been exposed to miniature golf to be able to simulate a golf course? Alan, no doubt.

Then there was ball. I was so unathletic that I can't even remember which ball games they played. Notice I did not say "we" played. First of all, I was the youngest, but I was also little, skinny and frail. (Pershing used to put his thumb and a finger around my wrist with room to spare and giggle at the ridiculousness of it.) Eventually, there were enough boys in the neighborhood to require a larger lot than the Rohrer backyard for their games, so they graduated to a field that was part of a new city playground adjoining the Western Maryland Hospital. I often watched the games. Pershing was the organizer, the scorekeeper, the play-by-play announcer. He was starting early on the sports journalism career he still pursues, in 1994, even in semi-retirement.

Shinbone Alley was the name of the narrow cobblestone street that ran behind the houses on lower Baltimore Avenue and the rear of the houses on the next street. Shinbone Alley. Not just a neighborhood nickname but the official name as recorded in land records of the time and on modern maps as well. By day it was innocuous, serving as a shortcut at times. By night, unlighted, it was a terrifying passage to horror - or so I was told by the older boys, who delighted in taking advantage of my little-boy suggestibility. First they would set me up:

The ghosts are really out tonight. Look at 'em flying around behind that garage window. (In time I knew I was seeing the reflections of car lights passing in the distance.) Venturing closer, we would squint into the darkness at the other end of the alley and eventually, sure enough, I swore I could see "things" moving around. Then one of the older guys would dare an accomplice to walk the length of the alley,

which he would do and then return feigning awful, awful fright. “OK, Billy, it’s your turn. Walk slow and don’t come back till you count to 50.” Of course, I was scared every step of the way and swore I really saw ghosts. I did have a good imagination. I don’t know if the other kids believed me or not. But then, although young and naive, perhaps I *was* a pretty good little actor.

Alan, the doctor’s son, had more advantages than Pershing and I, especially in the late twenties and early thirties when times were hard for the Rohrer family. Alan went to summer camp, went on family vacations to New York and London, took cello lessons, belonged to the Y.M.C.A. AND was a Boy Scout.

I lost all envy of Alan’s scouting after one unforgivable blow to my delicate sensitivities occurred: Alan had permission to take me to his troop’s late evening hike on one of the nearby hills that enwrapped our town. Darkness fell and a campfire was started. One of the boys said to me, “Here, kid, throw this on the fire,” handing me a piece of wood. It was too dark to see that the proffered end was covered with s—t! I was glad that Alan hadn’t anything to do with that.

One Halloween I was the butt of another set-up. The older neighborhood kids took me along to do the usual dirty tricks - in those days “trick or treat” was unheard of. They made me soap the big front window of the A&P grocery store. “Don’t worry. The store’s closed.” But suddenly an employee bolted out of the door, grabbed me and guarded me while I wiped off all the soap. Maybe I hadn’t been set up, but that firewood incident gave me reason to be suspicious.

The big, new Y.M.C.A. building was directly across the street from our house on Baltimore Avenue. Pershing and I often went to the game room and watched the other boys shoot pool. Sometimes I sat on the bleachers in the swimming pool waiting for Alan’s swimming class to end. In the gym, Pershing watched basketball practice and games, nurturing his budding entrepreneurship in the sport which somewhat later matured and lasted for several years.

While the Y.M.C.A. afforded these free advantages, an official membership would have afforded more - plus status. But our families could not afford memberships for Pershing and me. What irony for them to realize that Grandpap had been a director of the “Y” in earlier years! Then we learned there might be a chance for us after all. The sign read something like:

**FREE MEMBERSHIPS FOR BOYS WHO QUALIFY.
SIGN UP IN THE OFFICE ON MONDAY.**

Without saying a word at home, we boldly crossed the street, went into the red brick building that we longed to be a part of, and lined up to claim our membership.

It got to Pershing's turn.

"What's your name, Son?"

"Pershing Rohrer."

"What? Pokey Moore?"

Pershing repeated his name and after a few more questions I had my turn. Then each of us was given a form on which our parents were to attest that they could not pay the stipulated fee and requested a free membership be granted their son. Back home we heard:

"Good God, you kids! You've disgraced the Rohrer name, begging like that!" (Oh, ignominy!) "Don't ever let me catch you doing a thing like that again! Did they ask you to give your name?"

"Well, sort of. But I'm not sure he really got it right. He thought it was Pokey Moore," said Pershing.

"Pokey Moore? Pokey Moore? Heavenly Father!"

Then came an outburst of hysterical adult laughter, perhaps negating whatever punishment was being considered. But Pershing and I knew that our forms were destined for the trash.

Around 1929 my exciting playworld was jolted by Pershing's departure with his parents for Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. When he came back in 1931, he lived elsewhere. We attended different schools, lived in different worlds. But we saw each other occasionally and were never out of touch for long.

(Life was not all play - we did go to school. But that will be the subject of the next chapter.)

