

My Grandfather's Death



Frank C. Bedinger, Sr. 1886-1977

Frank Cleveland Bedinger, Sr., my maternal grandfather –whom I called “Poppa”- - passed away Aug. 2, 1977 in his 91st year. In a way it may be said his death was overdue: he had been an invalid, blind and bed-ridden for some time. But in another way, he had what I consider an enviable death: He died in the tiny rural town of Boydton, Va. where he had lived the great majority of his life, in his own home, in his own bed, in his daughter Lucy’s arms, in sight of the graveyard where he would be buried, next to his beloved wife, Lena. And he was ready for the Good Lord to take him. Few in this day and age will be privileged to have such a death.

I was spending the summer of '77 in the Republic of Honduras, doing a little geologic field work, visiting friends, and generally enjoying exploring backwoods portions of this quaint little banana republic. On Sat. July 9th I phoned Poppa (making an international phone call from a booth in the Tegucigalpa headquarters of the Honduran national phone service was, in those days, quite an iffy undertaking) and spoke to him for what proved to be the last time. He was very weak, his voice barely audible, but he could hear me say that I loved him, which was important to me.

On Aug. 2, word came that Poppa had left this world and was finally at rest. And this initiated an involved mini-saga that saw me make a flying trip from Tegucigalpa to Boydton the very next day, serve as a pallbearer the following day, and return to Tegus the next. It was a head-spinning excursion, almost like time travel, alternating multiple times between the 19th and 20th centuries. Backwater rural Honduras had not fully emerged from the 19th century and neither had Boydton in some ways. But getting from Tegus to the major airport nearest Boydton, and then back to Tegus, was definitely 20th century jet-age travel.

In the morning of Aug. 3 I booked a flight for that same day out of Tegus to Miami.

But I had driven down to Honduras from the U.S. in my Volkswagen bus and could not legally leave the country without it. Fortunately my good friend Peter Deinken worked out of the U.S. Embassy in Tegus and was able to arrange for the Embassy to garage my vehicle and give me a document proving that they had custody of it. With this paper I was able to leave the country without taking the vehicle with me.

In Miami I got a flight to Atlanta and on to Raleigh-Durham. Miraculously I made my connection in ATL in spite of a delay in MIA. And my cousins Hutch and Lucy were awaiting me at RDU. And thus I arrived Boydton around 1 AM Aug. 4, scarcely 36 hours after learning of Poppa's death.

At a more civilized hour that same morning, I borrowed some clothing suitable for a funeral from my uncle Frank, and attended a elaborate luncheon served to numerous family members from all over, many of whom I had never met before. There was a huge turn-out in honor of Poppa, which was to be expected, as he was much beloved by all who knew him.

The service commenced at 3 PM the same day, in the small, white frame Boydton Presbyterian church built in 1820, where my grandmother Lena used to play the hymns for services on the pump organ. This little church, rather severe in its embellishments, looked like something out of a Tom Sawyer movie, especially with the congregants trying to beat the August heat using cardboard funeral parlor fans. I served as one of the pallbearers. As I recall it all these years later, there was not a lot of sadness, because it was widely recognized that Poppa's time had come and his passing was a genuine release. And there was much joy in remembering him and his life and in reuniting, however briefly, with seldom-seen family members.

That evening, my parents, Lucy and Bill, drove me back to RDU and by 9:40 PM I was on my way back to Honduras, arriving Tegus at 11:15 AM on Aug. 5. I retrieved my VW bus from the Embassy, met an arriving fellow geologist at 5 PM and the next morning we headed out into the field to collect samples for a paleomagnetic study.

It was truly a time-warping journey made possible by 20th century jet age travel, with remarkably 19th century settings at either end of air routes. I was lucky not to have been in the field in rural Honduras when news of Poppa's demise arrived at Tegus (had I been in the field, a week or more might have passed before I got the news). And I was lucky in flight availabilities (probably an impossibility today) and in making all my connections. And I was very grateful to have been able to honor Poppa by being present at and a participant in his funeral service. I did so love that man. As did we all.

--Ric Finch
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