

eMa-Hi Times

Winter 2010 – Class of '59

Life as a gringo in Costa Rica.

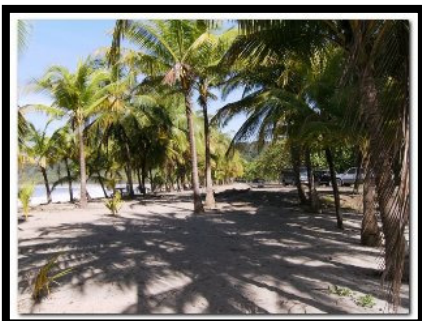
Gary Rossi

While “gringo” has its origins in Mexico to describe the uniforms the US Army soldiers wore to chase Pancho Villa around, it is used in the rest of Central American to good naturally refer to Americans.

Costa Rica sits in Central American between Nicaragua on the north and Panama on the south. I won't take time about geography except to say that Costa Rica has everything you can imagine. It is the same size as the Oregon counties of Deschutes, Jefferson, Crook, Wheeler and Harney combined. Not big, but not an island either. Costa Ricans refer to each other as “ticos”. A man is called a tico; a woman is a tica.

So in June of 2005, after having made whirlwind tour of most of the country in March with Nancy, I returned to the area we had enjoyed most and thought we would like to live. But I get ahead of the story.

The reasons for us looking outside the USA for a place to relocate were two-fold, politics and the foreseeable economic turn down. We thought it was time to love it or leave it. We choose Costa Rica.



I went to Guanacaste, the large province (state) on the northwest pacific coast which is the most affected by foreigners. It also has some of the loveliest beaches in Costa Rica, and is the locale of our favorite beach, Playa Carrillo.

Costa Rica has the most democratic and stable government in Central America, with a real government



bureaucracy which employs hundreds of thousands of people; by their constitution ticos have prohibited an army; it has developing infrastructures, mandatory education and a major city, San Jose, which would remind you of Portland, Oregon without water.

If you visit the Pacific coastline, the northwest central area has been completely “gringoized and americated”, you can easily get by without a word of Spanish. If you venture out into the country where things become very “tico” and rural, not much English is spoken, but sign language and a language book of phrases work wonders.

The ticos are very friendly and not too motivated in the hinterlands. In the cities life is at a faster pace and in San Jose, you would think you are in a major city anywhere in the world. I think about 25,000 Americans live in Costa Rica.

After many months of looking at every type of property available from condos, beach front houses (wow are they expensive), houses, bare land and village lots, I settled on 14 acres about 4 miles from our favorite beach. The property was close to a village with a population of about 300 souls. Every pueblo has its mandatory church, pulperia (mom and pop store), footbul (soccer) field, school and of course, a bar. Ticos are healthy drinkers of alcohol, and have to be because their national booze is called “guaro” a cross between Tennessee moonshine and turpentine. More on that later.

The real estate procedures are slightly different than in the US, but with care and a good lawyer, you can safely buy real estate. In our case, it turned out that about 4 different people claimed ownership to the property I had made the offer on. After four months of “clearing the title” we were no closer to owning than swimming across the Pacific. So I aborted that sale. Good thing I did because within 2 years a new “paved” beach route highway was made adjacent to the property we had sought to buy. Escaped the bullet on that one.

The memorable thing about that experience was that one of older farmers who owned the property invited me in for breakfast after I had looked at the property (I was with his nephew). The house was typically tico with cement block walls and a corrugated metal roof. No heat is needed and air conditioning is unknown in the brush. The kitchen area was small but clean and the wife was cooking on a wood stove apparatus, which was really just a cement bowl-shaped area on a concrete counter. The chickens were coming into the kitchen from the back yard. I could see a pig or two out the back door. They did have electricity and a telephone, running water (no hot water), and best of all, 3 huge mango trees in the yard.

The woman made the national food “Gallo pinto” (a mixture of white rice and black beans seasoned with cilantro). She cracked half a dozen fresh eggs on the flat iron and served up a tasty breakfast accompanied with mango juice and the strongest coffee I had encountered in Costa Rica. I later learned that they raise their own coffee beans. All of this is going on without me being able to communicate with them except through the nephew.

After that sumptuous meal we sat on the front porch and exchanged pleasantries. It was now 10 am and 95° F. The old man (probably younger than I am) said something and got up to go inside the house. The nephew laughed and asked if I liked whiskey? I said I had drunk a little whiskey in my life. He said, “good, you must now celebrate with a drink or two.”

The farmer returned with a green bottle of sorts and three water glasses. He poured each glass half full of a clear liquid and gestured a toast. "Bottoms up", I said and took a good swig. That is the last breath I took for a good two minutes. They laughed until they were crying, and until they thought I might not breathe again, when the nephew got me some water. I learned that the secret of drinking this mind numbing drink is to take smaller sips and use a lemon if you need it.

I finished my glass and the farmer poured another round and then another. He was nice enough to offer me water and lemons now. By the time we had finished we were blood brothers and great friends. The wife was not laughing but was tolerant. Lucky for me the nephew drove home because I could not make both feet move at the same time. I am thankful that I did not move up to that property next to my new friend, because I would be dead by now, but smiling. That was my introduction to guaro, and it was the homemade moonshine kind of stuff.

I had pretty much taken up full time living in hotels still looking for property and meeting people. And then my whole family joined me in Playa Carrillo for Thanksgiving 2005. We rented a huge house 300 yards from the beach which sleeps 14 people or more if you double up. It had its own housekeeper and swimming pool. It took me two days of searching Santa Cruz and Nicoya to find a turkey, and I got it from a Chinese grocer and, believe it or not, it was a frozen Norbest from the USA. We had no cranberries or white flour, so we used mangos, and smashed up Cheerios to make our gravy. Chewy! It was a really great T-day... and 90 degrees F.

I discovered that the owner of the house was selling some lots nearby in the village and we made an offer and acquired two lots to build our retirement get-away upon. We all went home and I returned after Christmas, to start planning our house. Things were booming in the real estate business world and in Costa Rica, and it was hard to get bids, plans, or anything reasonably priced at that time, so I came home for awhile.

We put our little horse ranch up for sale and started making plans to expatriate. Nancy started planning to wind down her law business which we thought would take about a year. I returned in March, 2006, to continue with our plans and it soon became obvious to me that you can only lie around on the beaches so long, and hang out in the bars so long, and then boredom sets in and you get home sick. I started going around the country and seeing everything I could. I saw all of Guanacaste.

By that time I had made friends with several English speaking Italians, a multi-lingual Dutchman and many ticos. All ticos wanted to learn English. There are many Americans and Canadian realtors in Costa Rica. After a few months I became interested in the real estate business and conceived a plan to operate an internet real estate service/agency. Incidentally, there is no government licensing entity in Costa Rica, so it was easy to become an agent. I just said I was a real estate broker and *voila*, I was.

That's when the top of the money pit opened! I had a website created, real estate forms developed in Spanish and English (no one else's were good enough... too simple). I hired some property finders, a part-time clerk helper who spoke some English. I set up a small office.

Did I mention that even to this day my Spanish is no better than it was in high school? Como esta' usted? Mas cervezas, por favor. That's about it... except for the important one... donde el bano? At least if you want a whiskey you say WHeeeSKEY por favor, and the waitress brings you a scotch! They ain't heard of American bourbon in most of Costa Rica.

I deviated, sorry. Back to my real estate business. The website never did work properly even though it was created by an American genius, at least that's what she said. She is now in Qatar or someplace helping Exxon look for oil. She turned out to be a geologist on the run. The second webmaster finally figured out the problem. The Costa Rican government owns or controls all of the public utilities in the country including the internet and cell phones.

When we finally "smuggled" the website out to a US webhosting company, things got much better. I had thought up the great name of "TICOAMERICAN REAL ESTATE" as the company name. I formed two corporations, one for the business and one for the property, and started advertising listings. Oh, I forgot, in Costa Rica, property owners do not sign listing agreements. There is no such thing as an exclusive listing agreement. It's open season on realtors and listings.

For the type of education and working experience I have had (shhhh, I'm a lawyer), I was like a lamb in the lion's den. Not understanding a thing any of the tico owners said didn't help, but I had plenty of translators and online computer translations. However, now I know that many things are lost in translation.

For the first year nothing much happened except pouring much money into the business and living expenses without much action. But I did see almost every property for sale in Santa Cruz, Nicoya and Nandayure Cantons (counties). It's actually not that easy to compete online with 50,000 other realtors world wide trying to sell property in Costa Rica. I soon learned about optimization, but not enough to help.

A sidelight is that on a regular tourist visa (which is just a stamp on your passport when you enter Costa Rica) is the 90 days limitation on stay. After 90 days you have to leave the country for at least 72 hours, and that has to be stamped on your passport. But Nicaragua borders to the north and Panama to the south. Both countries have much to offer and Nica-land is cheap but a little more risky.

Another interesting note, the Costa Ricans treat the Nicaraguans (nicas) just like we treat illegal Mexican aliens. That is as less than second class citizens, almost slave labor. In fact most of the hand and agricultural work is done by the nicas. The Ticos won't stoop so low as to do that sort of work anymore. Sound familiar?

To learn more about the real estate business in Costa Rica, in late 2006 I went to work for an American friend who managed a Century 21 agency in Jaco' (pronounced "Haco" not "Jocko") on the central pacific coastline about 1.5 hours from San Jose'. It has the reputation of being the "'sin city" of Costa Rica. It's a wild and crazy town, much more like Winnemucca than Las Vegas. Did I mention that gambling and prostitution are legal and controlled by the government? Yup, you bet.

Anyway, I moved into a one bedroom house in a gated little cottage compound right behind the real estate office in downtown Jaco'. What I did not realize was how wild and loud the night life was in Jaco'. Within two doors on each side of the office was a "disco" dance hall with salsa and rock and roll music, not necessarily in that order, going loud, loud until 3 am except on Friday and Saturday when I don't think they shut the doors; and on the other side was the "Beetle Bar" with an authentic VW bug hoisted and impaled in front of the joint. It is classic, open front...no doors or windows. The walls are on hinges and are just raised up for business hours. On Wednesday of the first week I had lunch and a beer with the boss at the quiet and empty Beetle Bar. Good food and cerveza con hielo (beer on ice, because it is so hot that your beer gets warm in one minute).



On Friday my friend, Bill, who incidentally speaks tex-mex Spanish with a thick Texas accent, invited me to go to dinner and for drinks afterwards at some of the local "spots". Image every neon sign in Coos Bay being concentrated into 1 block (maybe that's an understatement). Nighttime Jaco' is bright. We finally we made it to the Beetle Bar on the way home. It was about 1:00am and you could not get within 50 feet of the front entry. Only taxis were allowed near the front of the place. The bouncers are huge and usually American. Costa Ricans are not, on average, very big.

Bill, having good connections, got us in the back door through an adjacent building. I stopped in my tracks when we entered what had been this sleepy little bar at lunchtime. It was wall to wall beautiful, and not so beautiful but equally well equipped, young women of every shape, color and size. Literally, it was 3 or 4 females to each male. I guessed that this was the "swing shift" at the hooker bar.

To make a long story short, it was an interesting evening for an old man. I felt like a voyeur, but it was obvious that my observations did not deter the business at hand.

After that for two months, Friday and Saturday nights were like being somewhere a person wouldn't want to live full time. I have heard that for the sake of tourism, Jaco' has been cleaned up... at least a little, by an Amway connected group which bought up mucho beachfront property and built condos on the beach before the new laws went into effect.

I finally got together with my multi-lingual Dutch friend in Santa Cruz to partner up in the real estate business and started in earnest showing properties (which of course we did not have listings on). One time we had set up to put together a buyer and a seller on a really nice large property adjoining the city of Nicoya. The day before our US buyers were coming into country, we visited the owner, Don Carlos (anyone with property is a "don" down there), who immediately upon hearing we were bringing in American buyers to look at his 200 acres, raised his price from \$2.1 million to \$4 million. Our buyers refused even to look at the property or TicoAmerican anymore either.

It was common, even after signing what we would call an earnest money agreement, for the seller would show up at closing and refuse to sell except for a big increased price. Eventually the ticos and gringo resellers priced themselves out of the market. And then the real estate collapse hit everywhere and really hard in Costa Rica. With the coming of American Title Companies, buying property is much easier now.

I need to mention the “5 per centers”. Everyone in Costa Rica sells real estate - cousins, brothers, sisters, and friends. And traditionally, anyone who puts the seller and buyer together for a successful sale gets a 5% commission. And a realtor typically uses local ticos to find real estate for them. It is not uncommon for 3 or 4 people to show up at a closing, all claiming to be entitled to the 5% commission. Needless th say, I am no longer in the real estate business.

In Costa Rica tico driving provides both comic relief and life-threatening encounters. The rules of the road were written by the Marques of Queensbury... there are none. Going as fast as you can go, and passing anywhere and any time, including on curves, are the norm. The old road between the beaches and San Jose, appropriately named “ruta una,” is so curvy that at night the cars keep their lights turned off going up the hill so that they can see the cars coming down the hill, allowing them to pass on blind curves, if there is no glow. Driving at night has another hazard, chuck holes, otherwise known as “huecos”, which are omnipresent and large enough that a Volkswagen bug can be lost in some of them.

I liked to live in small hotels inland (15 miles) where there were not so many people and they usually had pools, a restaurant, maid service and lots of room. The weather is less humid than on the beaches or in the forests. I usually rented a cabina with small kitchenette, bath with hot water, bedroom, living room and dinette. The staffs at all of the places were great and helped with Spanish whenever I would try. Oh, fresh, ripe tropical fruit is everywhere in the summertime and dirt cheap.

I have heard of gringos living in Costa Rica on their social security of \$1000-\$1200 month. I never came close to making it on that figure and I was trying to watch my expenses, but also enjoying myself. Food is cheap, booze on a par with the US and gas very expensive. Cars are outlandishly priced. If you owned your own home and were frugal a person could do it, but I don't want to try. My Dutch friend claims that he and his wife and two kids live on \$800 per month.

I had many funny experiences with the policia. One time I went to Alajuela near San Jose to purchase a used vehicle from another gringo. I thought that was a safe bet. We met, made a deal and then he said we needed to get a lawyer to transfer the title. It was Sunday afternoon at 1 pm. But he found a lawyer who opened up and we went and signed the papers before his secretary, the lawyer was nowhere in sight. Since it was Sunday I could not get insurance (again through the government), so the seller said he would not cancel his until Tues. “Great”, I said and off I went.

Sunday afternoons in Alajuela is busy with fiestas, markets and the general crush of an over-populated urban area. I stopped to look in a shop and as I pulled back on the busy street a little sedan came speeding along and hit me on the back bumper breaking his headlight. It is a mortal sin to move your vehicle after an accident in Costa Rica, so I stopped dead center in middle of a busy intersection.

Most traffic was stopped. For some reason ticos love auto accidents and immediately at least 300 people standing around watching as the owner (not the driver) of the other vehicle came charging out and started screaming in Spanish. He came up to my chest in height which did not impede his tantrum in the slightest. He ran around the cars yelling something like “cara piche gringo”. For some reason, probably the fear of being drawn and quartered by the mob, I kept my cool and finally found a phone and called the guy I just bought the car from. He said he would come and help.

When I went back to the car, the wild little tico was still frothing at the mouth, but had picked up a 2x4 and was threatening to break out my windshield. By this time I was tired of hearing “cara piche” whatever it meant and I walked up to him, grabbed the board out of his hands and yelled “shut the f..k up”. And he did. That phrase obviously has international understanding.

Within minutes the gringo guy arrived and, after some bickering in Spanish with the tico, asked me if I had \$150 USD? I did. He gave the tico guy the money; and that was when the policia arrived. After some more discussion in Spanish, “my man” asked me for \$100, which I did not have. So off we went to the ATM with the policia following in their squad car. I got \$100, gave it to the cops, thanked them, and that was the end of the whole affair. When I asked I was told “cara piche” means “prick face”. So I guess the tico guy and I are even.

Tourism tips:

The way to see Costa Rica is to get on a plane with 3 days clothes in a large duffle bag (you don't need much and you can buy cheap throw away stuff there), credit cards with good limits and \$1000 cash. I always found Travelers checks slowed me down unless in a major resort or restaurant. You can get cash at ATMs which are everywhere in the country. Ticos do not use checks; they use cash (colones) and credit cards. Rent a car (check online for rates and make a reservation in the high season), and if you are getting off of the main highways, get a 4x4. Do not exchange money at the American airports going either way... do all currency exchange in Costa Rica.

The buses run like clockwork but are sometimes crowded and stop at every tree, but they do go almost everywhere because most ticos do not drive an automobile. But that is changing. Taxis are everywhere in the larger towns and will take you anywhere for a fee.

Unless you want to stay at the destination resorts or major hotels, or you are going during a major holiday or fiesta, I would not bother to make many hotel reservations. Most all hotels are clean and I drank the water everywhere I went. Bottled water is available everywhere also, for the less adventuresome. Drink lots of beer, don't dehydrate. I prefer Rock Ice con lemon (with lemon), but Imperial and Pilsen are good domestic beers. Drink your beer on ice – you'll get used to it fast.

The beaches are absolutely beautiful and the water is warm (79 to 82 F) always. But one must be careful. Because of wave action, tides and currents there are few really safe swimming beaches. The reefed or cove beaches are best for water playing. The surfing is very good. Unlike other beach areas like Hawaii and Mexican tourist areas, most of Costa Rica's beaches are underdeveloped. There are many beach villages which look like “margarita land”, with the bars right on the beach and pretty basic. Food is good but not special in the basic restaurants. Cafes are called “sodas” pronounced “so thes”. They are good places to eat, no matter how simple they look. Don't be afraid. Try them at least for breakfast or lunch.

The best time to go is from Dec 15 to April 15 which is their summer. From June to Dec 1 is the rainy season and the ocean is cloudy with silt, but still warm. Christmas and Easter times are tico time at the beaches and you cannot even lay down on most of the good beaches, although the sightseeing is very good.

So look at a map, go online and chart out a tour route. The distances are very small in the country and if you stay on the main highways for most travel, you can make good time. Don't be afraid of side trips into the country, as long as it is dry weather. I have never been anywhere that I could not find a decent hotel to stay in without reservations even during the high seasons. Don't drive at night if you can help it. I have driven from Santa Cruz in Guanacaste on the Pacific to Limon on the Caribbean side in 7 hours; it would take you about 10.

See the Pacific, see the rain forest at Monteverde, go to the Arenal volcano, ride the zip line tours in the jungle canopy. See the howler monkeys everywhere, take a visit to Rio Tarcoles Bridge and see the huge crocodiles, go to some of the local fiestas and if you get a chance see the bull riding events. I guarantee that it is the bull which has mercy on the hombres. Visit San Jose (if you must).

Go to Jaco' to see the condos on the beach and the surf city fun at night. I would suggest at least ten days, but a week can be fun and productive.

The other way is to go to a destination resort or a beach village with reservations. I like Playa Panama, Playa Grande, Playa Avellana, Playa Garca (small), Playa Samara (great) and Playa Carrillo (superb but not exciting or well developed). This is the tropics at their best. Kick back; play in the warm surf, snorkel, scuba, swim, deep sea fish, or just sun bathe. It's all there.

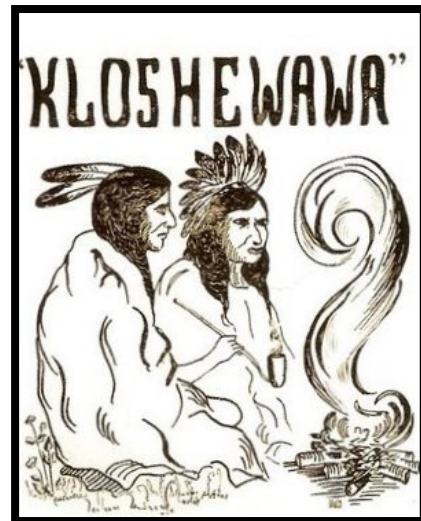


The Caribbean side of Costa Rica is not as developed as the Pacific and is populated by many folks who have come over from the Caribbean islands and speak that interesting Jamaican Rastafarian dialect and are pretty loose. The sea is beautiful but the weather is hot and muggy, and the skeeters are bird size. The Pacific side is my favorite. I have been from end to end and coast to coast of the country and like Guanacaste most.

I have a hundred stories of my misadventures, but can say that Costa Rica is a country in which you can feel personally safe from harm and invigorated by the sun. But don't leave your personal property unattended. Most of the ticos are poor and they think gringos are rich and don't need everything we have. It is a country of great beauty and incredible geo-diversity. It is well worth a vacation. It won't be wasted.

And, I am at your disposal to answer any question that I can. Pura Vida.

The following information comes to us from the Marshfield history archives via Franklyn Huntley... “As many times as we have yelled "**Os-ke-wa-wa**" in our Marshfield loyalty song, this is the first time that I have seen it spelled out.” The graphic is from the front cover of the 1917 Marshfield Annual. The word/phrase in “Chinook jargon” means:
To give good words or advice.



John Norton sends along this information and a link to a great film clip of the Pacific meeting Oregon at Shore Acres State Park.

I just returned from a few days in Coos Bay. The Allegany Tavern is all closed up and hardly recognizable. The Halfway Tavern is still (more or less) going strong with the same wonderful feisty owner-woman running it. Don't be put off by the setting and exterior. It isn't nearly so scary once you get inside. Heartily recommended, worth the trip toward Coquille. Don't miss the dead end turn off to get to it though (before you can see it from the highway) or it's a long back-track.

I did not know that it was the original Green Acres Tavern, and was moved in roughly 1953 when they widened the highway above Green Acres and the state bought out the owner at that original location.

Boy, it rocked in the fifties as did the Allegany while WTCO was booming up there on the river.

And, if you don't live near Coos Bay today- here's a link to an internet video of the waves at Shore Acres... enjoy!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhWsPf6TdgM>

What do you remember about WW II ...?

*Because most of us '59ers have birth dates in the 1940-41 range, we often found that in American or European history classes, before we could get to the back of the book and learn something important about World War II, the class was over, and we didn't learn anything. But among our class members was a girl, with her parents, who actually lived through that time. They experienced the horrors of war, living in and escaping from occupied lands, being "displaced persons," and finally migrating to the United States. **Maija Abolins**. You would hardly have noticed any difference when she appeared as a sophomore at Marshfield High School. She had very little accent. She was quiet and unassuming.*



Her story has been written down by her husband Dick Freel, and together, they have agreed to share this story of three very courageous people. What follows are excerpts from his 100 page manuscript. Dick writes:

This is a tribute to my father-in-law and mother-in-law. It is a true story as told to me in bits and pieces at different times by Eriks and Zenta and what I observed over a forty-year time frame. For me this story is a real drama lived by real people. In writing I tried to place myself as if being there with them, in the stories being told – and I simply recorded what I observed and heard.



Map of Latvia

Maija's parents Eriks Abolins and Zenta Abolins were both born in Riga, Latvia, in 1905 and 1906. As a toddler Eriks led a sheltered life and remained close at home under the watchful eye of his mother. ... At the age of about seven or eight Eriks started visiting his Grandfather's farm. The farm was close to Riga and getting to the farm was no problem for Eriks. The farm belonged to his mother's father and Eriks would spend most of the summers on the farm and watch and help his Grandfather. Eriks loved his grandfather's farm – it gave him an opportunity to see and get acquainted with farm animals. Also the farm was close to timberlands and it allowed him the opportunity to spend time in the woods. He always loved his time in the forests - he spent as much time as he could there.

During the winter months he and his sister Margrieta (born in 1908, died in 1925 of the flu) attended grade school. Since Latvia was under the rule of Russia all students in school had to learn Russian as a second language.... As the political climate continued to heat up and Germany began to get more powerful – most Latvians could see that Europe was going to war. Just before the World War I broke out there were many Latvian families that left and went to Russia and some as far as Moscow. It was during this time that Erik's father and mother decided, for their safety, to leave and take their family and go to Moscow until the political climate quieted down. Zenta's life in Latvia was quite different than Eriks'. As a toddler she too spent her time in Riga under the watchful eye of her grandmother on her mother's side. Her mother had a job that kept her away most of the daytime. She was a professional seamstress and her work entailed working sometimes on Sunday to support the family. Zenta bonded closely with her grandmother. She had a sister Herta who was three years older than Zenta. When the war situation heated up Zenta and her family remained in Riga.

The Fight for Independence

For centuries the Latvian people had been struggling with the experience of being run over and conquered by its various neighboring nations –Sweden, Finland, Russia, Germany and Poland. As the result of the European swelling of national pride in the later half of the 1800s, each of the European countries started seeking its own independence. The idea of an independent Latvia became a reality at the beginning of the 1900s. As the First World War spread into Latvian territory and directly engaged the entire Latvian population, a powerful pro-independence movement developed. Courageous Latvian riflemen called the “Latviesu Strelnieki” fought on the Tsarist Russian side during WW I and earned recognition for their bravery across Europe. Confusion followed the war, which enabled the pro-independence forces to consolidate their efforts and pursue their dream. Latvia independence was proclaimed shortly after the end of the First World War.

In the spring of 1917, during World War I, the Russian revolution began. On May 14, 1917 the Tsar regime was overthrown. This left Russia in turmoil for the next nine months before a form of government was stabilized. By December 1918 the Bolsheviks had the absolute majority and were in power. The new government put additional concern for the Latvian people. Leading up to the close of the war, the German occupation forces attempted to combat the defenders of Latvian independence, but the Armistice, November 11, 1918, provided the opportunity needed for Latvia to seek its independence. Peace, for which Latvia had waited so long, had finally arrived, and the work of building a new nation could begin. Deeply disillusioned in the new Russian Bolshevik totalitarian government; Latvian refugees who had fled to Russia during the war continued to return to Latvia until 1927. Returnees included Latvian Riflemen and former non-supporters of Latvian independence – altogether

more than 200,000 people returned. Eriks and his family were among the first to come back to Riga.

Eriks enrolled in college at the University of Riga right after finishing his high school. He enrolled in the field of forestry. He entered a five-year program where at completion he would attain a diploma equivalent to a Masters Degree. When Eriks was attending Riga University he worked for the Latvian Government during the summer months. His job was scaling logs to determine the volume of lumber in each log and kept a tally of the amount as logs were being exported to foreign countries.

Zenta finished high school a year later than Eriks and enrolled at the University of Riga. At a University social function Zenta and Eriks paths crossed for the first time. After attending the year at the University Zenta dropped out and worked in a sugar factory. She worked at the factory for four to five years and decided she would rather work as a secretary. She put in for a job with the government and eventually accepted a job with the Forestry Department. She was at first assigned to a job in Riga but later accepted a secretarial job on a Forest Ranger District southeast of Riga - where Eriks worked as a forester with the Latvian Forestry Department and in about four years was promoted to District Ranger. No one knew or understood how it happened but about a year after Eriks became District Ranger a spark ignited and the relationship between Eriks and Zenta flourished, and they were married December 25, 1936.

During those early working years, Eriks became interested and very vocal in political matters which would figure prominently in why the Abolins family needed to leave Latvia during the closing months of WWII. The story of the family's escape actually starts a few years before their escape from Latvia. The war had been going on in Europe for two years before the United States entered it in December of 1941. Sometime during 1939, as a result of a signed agreement between Russia and Latvia - the Russian military entered Latvia and established military installations. Many Latvians were skeptical of the agreement. The skepticism proved to be warranted as the Russian military began their installations - it turned into a cancerous growth. Once started, the Russian military kept bringing in more and more military equipment and personnel until in the summer of 1940 they were in complete control and fully occupied Latvia. At this time communist leaders replaced the Latvian government. Latvia had been a free and sovereign Nation for 20 years.

Russia occupied Latvia for one year because on June 30, 1941, Germany launched their offensive drive into Eastern Europe – with its mission to destroy and conquer Russia. To accomplish their mission the German army had to pass through the Baltic States – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – to capture Moscow and take control of Russia. During the time Russia occupied Latvia, its people lost all of their civil liberties and were treated in a harsh, brutal, and in an atrocious manner, particularly if one spoke out against the Russian government and communism. Depending how severely one spoke out, the punishment was one of two kinds - execution on arrest, or be picked up, put on a train and sent to Siberia, which was nothing more than a death sentence.

With little imagination one can appreciate and realize the tremendous turmoil, chaos and terror, the Latvian people were living and experiencing. It was a very demoralizing and unsettling time for the Latvian people. In order for the Russian government to control the masses of Latvian people, they depended heavily upon the hearsay technique. People that were randomly selected for Siberia would first get a “knock” on their door late at night - taken - and then by morning be shuttled off by railway in cattle cars to Siberia never to be

seen or heard from again. . They lived in constant fear in its worse form. From June 13th to June 18th, 1941, 20,000 Latvian citizens were taken to the railway, loaded into cattle cars and shipped to Siberia. By design, the people that were taken were the educated, community leaders, people that were suspected of speaking out against Russia and communism, previous Latvian officials, and religious leaders.

Eriks was active in politics during Latvia's independence and was a member of the organizers for the Farmers Party in Latvia's Parliament. He had gained public visibility leading up to 1940 when Russia began moving in military equipment and occupying Latvia. He had a masters degree in forestry – a forester in Latvia then received the same prestige as a doctor or lawyer. Starting in late 1940 he did speak out against the Russian Government and communism (which he detested) – but only to whom he considered his friends. In the summer of 1941 Eriks was in charge of a Forest Ranger District near Riga. A friend, one who Eriks knew as a committed communist sympathizer, came to him and told him that he should consider leaving because he had heard that Eriks and Zenta would receive the “knock” that night. He felt his friend was reliable. Eriks was not only fearful for their lives, but Zenta was six and a half months pregnant with Maija. Eriks pondered the alternatives he thought he had – he felt he had three choices. He and Zenta could leave and run, knowing he would probably be caught and be shot on arrest. Or, wait for the “knock” and give up without fighting, knowing they would be sent to Siberia. Or, he might receive a fake trial, be executed, and Zenta sent to Siberia alone. This was the most difficult decision Eriks and Zenta ever made and decided on their third choice – they would not be taken alive.

That night inside their home facing the door, Eriks sat on a stool with a loaded revolver in his hand. Zenta, six and a half months pregnant with Maija, sat in a chair with a loaded rifle in her hand. They were going to shoot it out knowing that their three lives would be taken. That night while waiting Zenta felt the little life stir inside her. And with quiet, soft tears, and with fear and deep reservations, she could only wonder – were they doing the right thing. The knock never came, but almost immediately following this incident Eriks was approached by high level forestry officials and was informed he would be transferred to a forestry office in Eastern Latvia close to the Russian border - affective immediately. At first Eriks strongly balked at his transfer - seeing it as a demotion and punishment for reasons he was not sure of. Again the same friend came to Eriks and said that he should accept the transfer and leave. Eriks always wondered if somehow it was through this friend that he was spared from the ‘knock’ on the door. Not knowing what to expect – Eriks and Zenta gathered up all their personal valuables, family heirlooms and put them in metal containers and buried them on Eriks' Grandpa's farm. When it became safe again, they hoped they would be able to return and reclaim them. Eriks and Zenta then left immediately and went to Rezekne, a community in Eastern Latvia.

Alone, Zenta made the long trip back to Riga, about ten days before Maija was expected and spent some time with her mother before going to the hospital for the birth. Eriks could not accompany Zenta because he had just started working at the new location and was not allowed. Baby Maija's arrival into the world was on September 15th, 1941. Maija was a beautiful, healthy, and strong baby – she had deep blue eyes and blond hair. A week later Zenta and her baby left the hospital to go home.

As the Russians began pushing the Germans back into Germany, across Latvia – Eriks and Zenta realized that they had to make the second biggest decision of their lives. Being a “marked man” they knew as soon as the Russians occupied Latvia again – the authorities would be seeking out Eriks for his arrest and execution. They had two choices – stay in Latvia or escape, leaving their homeland. If it were left to Eriks and Zenta, they would

remain in Latvia and fight for their country with no hope of their ever surviving. But not knowing what would happen to Maija, they decided Maija needed her mother and father and a better opportunity in life.

The Escape

As the retreating German army and advancing Russian army came closer to the Latvian border (late summer and early fall in 1944) Eriks and Zenta began to plan their escape. It seemed simple enough – having heard through the Latvian underground network they could connect with two Swedish cargo ships in Liepaja, a coastal town in southwest Latvia – then sail across the Baltic Sea to a coastal town in Germany. The plan called for Zenta and Eriks to split up and go separate routes - Maija going with Zenta. Since Eriks was a “marked man” it would be safer for Zenta and Maija to travel alone. Also traveling alone, Eriks could become more obscure and less likely be noticed than if the three traveled together. The route planned for Zenta and Maija would entail getting on and off various trains and walking considerable distances. Eriks would begin his escape by leaving on his motorcycle and attending to some official business in Northern Latvia. They would meet at Liepaja near the ship site. It was early November and very tense when the day arrived for their leaving – in parting they all three embraced. Eriks and Zenta knew the odds – anything could happen and realized that they may not see one another again.

Eriks’ journey went pretty much as planned. Riding his motorcycle he conducted official business in two cities north and northeast of Riga. As he approached Riga he stopped by his grandpa’s farm and buried another ten-gallon milk can with more family valuables, documents, and medals – anything that could be associated with him was included. Leaving his motorcycle somewhere between his grandpa’s farm and Riga - he then went on into Riga and gathered up his mother and father and Zenta’s mother and together they departed for the seaport in Liepaja. For their safety it was important that Eriks and Zenta’s immediate family leave Latvia – the communists punished by association. Being relatives of a “marked man” could have caused them much misery if they were to remain. Zenta’s sister, Herta and her son Vilnis did not accompany them - instead remained in Riga hoping that her husband who had been forced into the German army would return. It’s jumping ahead in the story, but Herta’s husband was never seen or heard from again.

Zenta and Maija left by boarding the train in Rezekne, Latvia, and began their long journey. They purposely took different trains and did not go in a direct path to Liepaja, to make it more difficult if they were to be followed. After leaving their third train, Zenta and Maija continued on to the next train depot, their journey going well. A number of German soldiers helped Zenta and Maija during their escape, and as a result Zenta considered the German soldiers as being kinder than the Russian soldiers, with one exception. As Zenta and Maija were walking toward their next train depot, Zenta noticed a couple of German soldiers acting differently than previous ones. As she got closer, the soldiers raised their rifles in a threatening manner and indicated to her to stop and not to proceed. This surprised and startled Zenta, and thoughts ran through her mind of stories of how some soldiers had treated women when found alone. She hesitated momentarily not knowing what to do or expect, and then, holding onto Maija’s hand, continued on as if to pass them. They moved over to block her way. After pausing for just an instant, she continued straight toward the soldiers. Unbeknownst to the soldiers Zenta, too, was armed. She walked to within a short distance of them, stopped and locked her eyes with theirs, and calmly, but in voice of faith, spoke, “You can take my life, but you can not take my soul.” These few words had a decided impact on the soldiers. They lowered their rifles to a non-threatening position and lowered their heads

and looked to the ground. Zenta and Maija veered slightly and continued on, never looking back.

That night Zenta and Maija boarded a passenger train that was to pull out early the next morning. Sometime during the night, they were awakened - bomber planes were heard and they seemed to be getting closer and closer and finally they came straight toward them. As quickly as possible the people aboard began jumping from the train and ducked and hid beneath the train. Following the explosion of the bombs Zenta heard cries of pain coming from people at the other end of the train. They heard the planes again and Zenta covered Maija with her body for a second time. Maija clung to her Mother and her small body trembled from fear as the screaming bombers came back for the second drop. A small prayer was offered by Zenta, "Lord, have mercy on them and please forgive them." The bombers were either American or British planes bombing what they must have thought to have been a German military supply train. The next day Zenta and Maija walked to another train depot and continued their journey to Liepaja. They finally arrived at their destination, and there was a somber, tearful, but happy reunion as Zenta and Maija were reunited with their family. It was sometime in late fall.

Two ships were being offered by the Swedish to be used in assisting escapees leaving for Germany. Eriks and his family would have preferred going to Sweden – but Sweden had been receiving refugees for sometime and had reached its saturation point. They continued to assist in getting people out of war torn countries – so they could go to other countries receiving refugees. Hundreds of families similar to Eriks' were waiting for the ships. There was no assigning of families to a particular ship – the families boarded a ship until it reached its capacity of about 450 escapees, and the ship left. It was a dark, moonless night, with high slightly breaking clouds – the night Eriks and his family left the port to cross the Baltic Sea to Germany. The ship that Eriks and his family boarded was the first to leave – and was leading the second ship by a short distance. The ship was sailing in total darkness "black out" Both ships had been instructed to sail in this manner. The captain of the first ship became greatly concerned as he looked back and could dimly see that the other ship was not applying total "black out." About four hours had elapsed since their departure. The stillness and quietness of the sea was suddenly and loudly interrupted. What seemingly came out of nowhere - the sound of whining-screaming bombers was heard as they descended from the darkened skies. Maija clung tightly to her mother – half-choked murmurs of "oh no-no" were heard as the bombs were on target. The people on the ship carrying Eriks and his family stood in complete shock and in disbelief as they watched a ball of fire and smoke rise into the air – their sister ship carrying Latvian friends and neighbors had been destroyed. The bombers ascended and never returned. The sister ship would eventually sink into the dark waters of the Baltic Sea. The first ship picked up the few survivors – but, for safety reasons it could not linger – and Eriks and his family continued on. Unspoken thoughts by everyone aboard the ship were – I could have been on that ship. They would wonder later if their sister ship had been traveling in total darkness would the bombers have seen it. They assumed allied bombers apparently had mistaken the lighted cargo ship to be a German military supply ship. The horror of war must be worse than hell.

Germany

Recovering from their shock from the bombing of the ship, and as they continued their escape on the Baltic Sea, Eriks and Zenta began working on a plan once they got to Germany. First they would go to a relative of Erik's mother and stay there until they determined what was best for them. They hoped that some type of public transportation

would be available once in Germany, and it was. It was a joyous reunion when they finally arrived. It had been a long trip from Eastern Latvia to their relatives' home, and they needed much rest.

The end of the war was now in sight – they heard that two months earlier the three big powers, United States, Britain, Russia, had met in Yalta, Ukraine – a pact was signed and major decisions were made regarding the occupation of Germany when the war ended. V-E Day came to Europe on May 8, 1945. During June and July France and the three big powers had various meetings and planning sessions for the postwar government for Germany. They established boundaries showing various Allied zones in Germany, United States zone – British zone – Russian zone – French zone. Along with this it was decided – using patrols for enforcement – that displaced persons could not cross back and forth between the Russian zone to the other Allied zones. During the time these high level meeting were conducted – Eriks and his family remained with their relatives. When hearing about the restriction concerning displaced persons crossing between the Allied and Russian zones – Eriks and Zenta's hearts sank. This was a major problem for them – they were in the Russian zone. If they were to remain in the Russian zone – which eventually became Eastern Germany – Eriks would still be a “marked man” subject to execution whenever he was captured. They had to get to the United States/British zones.

Taking what belongings they had – most of which was in a large wash tub carried between two people – Eriks and his family headed for the US/British zone. Part of the boundary between the Russian and US/ British zones was the Elbe River – about 50 feet wide – knee to hip deep – with a strong current. As the family arrived at the Elbe River – even with the aid of their rope Eriks realized that he was going to have to make several trips across the river. Tied with a rope – Eriks pulled the wash tub full of their belongings across the river and returned with an empty tub. All hanging onto the rope, Eriks assisted his mother and father and Zenta's mother across the river. Maija was then put into the wash tub and Eriks began to pull her across – Zenta being on one side of the river and Erik's father on the other side could assist in any rescue in the event that the tub capsized. At first Maija was frightened and wanted to stay with her mother but as Zenta talked to her she quieted down and fearfully hung on tightly to the rim of the tub. There were some anxious moments before Maija arrived safely on the other side. Eriks went back across for the last time to assist Zenta – and as they were about to enter the river they both looked up and let out a deep gasp - less than two hundred yards away were two American/British soldiers. Zenta and Eriks knew what the soldiers were supposed to do – they paused momentarily but noticed that the soldiers did not seem to notice them so they continued and crossed the river. As the family started to climb the riverbank there were anxious glances toward the soldiers - but they seemed to be looking at maps on the hood of their vehicle. Arriving at the top of the bank Eriks expected the soldiers to be advancing towards them. As he turned and looked the soldiers got into their vehicle and left. As the family turned to continue on their way there was a deep sense of relief and thanksgiving – they were free at last. They quickly faded into the German rural countryside and started to look for a displaced person camp.

Finding a Displaced Person Camp was the end of one story and the beginning of another. There were 200,000 people in the American sector from the Baltic States, including Latvians. The Abolins family would live in several different camps over a period of four years before they could secure a country to emigrate to, but it was not up to the “displaced person” to choose, however they had the freedom to move from camp to camp. The three camps that they stayed in for longer periods of time - Amberg, Hersbruk, and Nurnburg - housed mostly refugees from Latvia and were the remnants of old German

barracks. Eriks and his family stayed first in Amberg, then Hersbruk and last at Nurnburg – they stayed at Hersbruk the longest. The barracks gave more privacy for families and were usually warmer. Some camps had buildings with large rooms that had to be partitioned off. This was done by the occupants and was usually very crude –blankets hung from stretched ropes, stacked boxes, or anything that was available. In some cases the privacy was very minimal. The presence of several families or of families and unmarried people together in the same room was a common occurrence and sometimes did cause corruption of some moral standards and promoted vice. In some barracks if the room was large enough it was shared by more than one family. Sharing for Eriks and Zenta was with their parents – and they felt fortunate in comparison to other families. Lavatory facilities were centralized and shared by many families. They shared a “community” cooking area. Some bedding supplies and cooking utensils were provided by the UN organizations, but for the most part the refugees were expected to provide their own. Sometime later the refugees could get provisions from military surplus. The refugees managed the best they could. A number of times they would have “swap meets” where families would exchange for something they needed. Fuel supply was provided and materials for camp repairs were made accessible for the refugees. The UN organizations provided the bulk of the food for the refugees. The variety was something to be desired – but they provided food that gave between 1600 to 1900 calories per day per adult. Children were given food proportionate to their age.

Zenta’s employment was mostly housework for residences in the nearby cities. Knowing German helped her considerably. Zenta worked in home residences while living in all three of the camps. One family, the Bemers, Zenta got to know quite well. They helped out by giving Zenta needed small items for cooking, utensils, clothing and bedding. For several years after leaving Germany Zenta continued to correspond with the Bemers – they became good friends. Money that Zenta acquired was used first for the things she determined that Maija needed and was not provided by the camp – such as, milk, cheeses, fresh produce, warm clothing, and shoes. She would then do the same for the rest of the family. Zenta was very ingenious in utilizing and preparing foods. She used the heating stove for cooking or partial cooking of foods like potatoes (sometimes in the coals and sometimes in water on top of the stove). The heating stove was used for heating water for washing their hands and faces, bathing, dish washing, clothes washing and for scrubbing the floors.

Erik’s employment was working in the forests as a Forester. His fluent and non-accented German speech was a definite credit. From his training and experience in Latvia he knew all aspects of managing the forests. His employment was with the German government. The pay was extremely low – but for Eriks and Zenta it was better than sitting in camp waiting and doing nothing. What money he did acquire he and Zenta started saving and investing in postage stamps. He thought he would lose less due to inflation in having his money invested in stamps instead of working the money exchange system – it proved out to be the best. Eriks worked in the government forests while living in all three camps. (Years later while living in Bend, Oregon Eriks found out that he qualified to receive a German pension check. The amount was meager and he said that he really didn’t feel right about putting in for it.)

For a little girl, Maija’s life in the camps was really quite good. Her father and mother made sure she was never hungry, well clothed, kept warm and had friends in camp to play with. In the summer time she enjoyed going bare foot when it was hot. She made mud pies with her friends and in their own little world fed all of the pies to the refugees in camp. She played other made up childhood games with her friends. She particularly enjoyed going with her mother into the woods just outside of the camp and looking for mushrooms and picking flowers. Having mushrooms in camp was a delicacy. This had good swapping power. After

a couple of years, Maija began going to school in the camps. She attended school there for a couple of years and was just beginning to learn German with the thought that she would be going to a German school, but it never materialized – they left Germany first. While Maija’s mother worked in town, Maija’s grandparents looked after her. Staying in the DPC’s did not have any bad effects on Maija – she had a normal childhood experience while in the camps. Sometime while in the Hersbruk camp, Eriks and Zenta decided it was time for them to make their move. They wanted to leave Europe and to live in the United States, Canada, or Australia – their first preference was the United States. When they checked out the process of emigrating – they discovered that their parents were too old to go to any of the three countries that Eriks and Zenta wanted to go to. The restrictions were the same for most of the countries receiving refugees – they wanted younger people. This was a problem. But after further and continual checking, they found that Holland would receive refugees that were too old to work. Final arrangements were made for Eriks’ parents and Zenta’s mother to go to Holland. The day for their departure was sad; all knew that this was probably going to be the last time that they would see each other. They embraced and promised to write to one another.

Sometime in late fall of 1949 word arrived for Eriks, Zenta, and Maija - they had a sponsor in the United States. There were tears of relief and joy – they would be going to the country of their first choice. By this time they had moved to Nurnburg – which became the launching pad for most all Latvia refugees leaving Germany for other countries. They quickly acquired old wooden boxes from the military surplus and began to pack their meager belongings. Once a sponsor was identified things happened quickly for them leaving a short time to say their good byes. The final paper work was completed; all belongings packed and they boarded a train for the departing port in Hamburg.

Crossing the Atlantic

In arriving at Hamburg there was a quick transfer of their belongings from the train to the ship and Eriks and his family finally boarded the ship and set sail to their new home in America. There were many other refugees from Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania on the ship going to the United States. It would take about 10 days to cross the Atlantic Ocean. As Eriks and Zenta were on the ship they talked about their sponsor. His name was Mr. Abel and he lived on a farm near the rural community of Frazee, located in northwestern Minnesota. Mr. Abel was a German immigrant and had come over when he was a young man. Eriks, Zenta and Maija would be living on the farm with Mr. Abel.

December 10th, 1949 will remain a day that Eriks, Zenta, and Maija will always remember. It was a rather calm, cloudy day the morning when the skyline of New York City came into view. Shortly after they were going by the Statue of Liberty and from previous information they knew that the Immigration Building was close by. When they docked, their hearts beat a little faster as they left the ship and stood on American soil. Processing the legal paper work seemed to go much quicker and smoother than expected. One small incident happened that caused panic for Zenta and Eriks. Maija had not ridden on elevators before and as they entered the elevator to go back to the ground floor from the Immigration Office, Maija was not all the way in the elevator and the door began to close. Zenta gave a short launch for Maija, but another firm hand reached out and pulled Maija in just as the door closed. Zenta was sure that Maija was going to be crushed – they continued to the first floor and moved to where their belongings were being transferred. Their belongings were unloaded from the ship and loaded on the train quickly – they were in New York City less than two days.

It was December 14th, 1949 when the train approached Frazee, and Eriks, Zenta and Maija began to wonder how they were going to recognize Mr. Abel. Being December there was a lot of snow on the ground in northern Minnesota. The weather was about the same as to what they were used to in Latvia – cold but little wind. Mr. Abel lived a short distance from Frazee – about four or five miles. From their earlier correspondence Eriks and Zenta knew that Mr. Able was married. But when they arrived at the farm Mrs. Abel was not there. They would soon learn that Mrs. Abel would be staying in town with her son while Eriks and his family stayed on the farm. Mrs. Abel never came to the farm while Eriks, Zenta and Maija were there - in fact they never saw her all the time they were there.

In accordance with the immigration laws Eriks had agreed to work for Mr. Abel for one year. This too was somewhat a protection for Eriks and his family – they had someplace to work and stay for the first year. Even though Mr. Abel was along in years – he was about 60 years old – his farm did not have enough work for two men. Before Eriks and his family came to Frazee, Mr. Abel had made an agreement with his neighbor that Eriks would also work on the neighbor's farm. The neighbor's farm was large in comparison to Mr. Abel's farm - he had a lot of livestock, milking cows, feeding steers, sheep, pigs, and chickens. The work that Eriks did at Mr. Abel's farm paid for room and board for Eriks and his family. For the work he would do at the neighbor's farm Eriks would receive a farmer's wage.

It was typical in rural Minnesota that school started again after the holidays - the first Monday following New Years day. Zenta accompanied Maija her first day of school – but Maija would be walking home with her new friend from a neighboring farm. Zenta was extremely pleased in meeting Maija's teacher, Mrs. Odland. Maija knew and was able to speak but very little English. Because of the language barrier it was difficult for Mrs. Odland to place Maija in a particular class. Mrs. Odland started her in second grade and she and Maija hit it off well from the beginning. Mrs. Odland took Maija “under her wing,” so to speak, and concentrated in teaching Maija the English language. Maija picked it up extremely fast and Mrs. Odland quickly realized that Maija was a very capable little girl and by the end of the school year Maija was reading and speaking English with very little difficulty and without accent – actually speaking it better than her parents. By the end of the school year Maija was doing well in her studies and was not behind much in relation to her age – thanks to Mrs. Odland's extra effort.

It was after the farm planting was completed and there was a short break in the field work that Eriks, Zenta, and Maija took a short trip to Minneapolis to visit their Latvian friends. It was on such an occasion that Eriks visited the place of employment of one of his friends – a glove factory. There were available openings. Availability of work and Latvian friends were a strong pull for Eriks and Zenta to leave the farm and go to Minneapolis. It wasn't a surprise to Mr. Abel's – he had already sensed that Erik's heart was not in farming even though he was a good worker. When Eriks approached him about wanting to go to Minneapolis, he consented and released Eriks from the one-year agreement. After the hay and oats were harvested Eriks, Zenta and Maija said good-by to the farm and Mr. Abel, packed their belongings and traveled to Minneapolis. They would be in Minneapolis early enough for Maija to start to school opening day of the new school year. They all fell into their routine and everything went along smoothly. By the end of the school year Maija was doing so well that they bumped her up to the fourth grade skipping the third grade. And later she would go from the sixth grade to the eighth grade, skipping seventh grade.

It was sometime in the later part of the second year in Minneapolis that Eriks and Zenta had saved enough money to buy their first car. It was a 1936 Plymouth two door sedan. They

were all so happy – this would give them even more freedom. They now could take a few family drives out of the city – visit friends later at night and drive the car to church. Eriks was proud of their car. He still continued to ride the bus to work. Zenta never had any desire to drive a car and never did learn how. They all enjoyed their new home in the United States. As the anniversary of their fifth year in the United States approached, Eriks and Zenta began to think about becoming U.S. citizens. Shortly after Christmas of 1954 they started taking classes to become citizens. They had to attend several meetings – had things they had to learn, read and write in English in preparing for the tests. It was in March 1955 that Eriks and Zenta would take their citizenship test. There were other Latvians taking the test at the same time. The test seemed long, but they both passed with little difficulty. After passing the test they pledged their loyalty to the United States and became full citizens of the United States of America. The mere fact that her parents were now citizens Maija automatically became a citizen also.

A few months following becoming a U.S. citizen - Eriks started thinking about getting back into his chosen field of work in forestry. He had many forestry friends in Minneapolis who were also looking for forestry jobs. There was very little opportunity in the private sector for forestry jobs. But that didn't bother Eriks, he was more interested in government jobs. At first he thought of the Forest Service and put his application in but got no response from them. A couple of his friends were applying in the Bureau of Indian Affairs – Eriks sent his application in – but no response. Finally he heard about the Bureau of Land Management hiring foresters in Oregon. In his resume he emphasized his Latvian experience in reforestation. In the spring of 1956 Ross Youngblood, then the District Manager of the Coos Bay District in Oregon, read Eriks' application and about his reforestation experience. It just so happened that was what Ross needed – someone with reforestation experience. Eriks was selected and notified of his appointment. Eriks, Zenta, and Maija were excited. Eriks would be working in a field he thoroughly enjoyed - reforestation. Eriks was to report for work in Coos Bay, Oregon on July 1st 1956. The timing was perfect for Maija to start high school as a sophomore that fall.

Editor's note: Dick's manuscript continues for nearly 50 more pages, telling of the family's welcome to Coos Bay, Eriks' career with BLM and his reforestation adventures and successes, Zenta's working experiences, friends and church, and Maija's marriage to Dick and children, and then Erik's and Zenta's new roles as grandparents. What a wonderful story – thanks for sharing it Maija and Dick! Jane (Kutch) Mercereau.

An update from Sylvia...

Hi and greeting from China,

I have had some interesting experiences, and one in particular I would like to share with my classmates. It's called the Moon Bear Rescue group started by a British woman to rescue the Moon Bears from the Bear farms. It seems that thousands of years ago, Chinese medicine used bear bile to treat chronic illness like heart disease. Even now there are thousands of Moon Bears kept in small cages to extract their bile. This is an amazing story of how one woman started this NGO with the Chinese government to rescue the mistreated bears.

For more information and photos, check out this web site:

<http://www.animalsasia.org/blog/index.php?entry=entry091007-230857>

The one of the metal jacket is a cruel way the bears are subdued for bile extraction. One little bear stood by the fence and swung his head back and forth all day long. He had been so traumatized by his imprisonment that he couldn't stop his shaking head behavior. I think it is the most heart wrenching sight I have ever seen.

In my last correspondence I had the name wrong of my fellow Peace Corps Volunteer from North Bend, Oregon. His name is John Granger not John Garner. I was having a senior moment when I typed his name.

Take Care,

Sylvia (Burles) Clark

Sorry to Report...

Richard (Rich Barber) Huelshoff passed away Sunday, January 31st, 2010.



He had been diagnosed with lung cancer last fall, and succumbed to this disease while staying at his daughter's home in Coos Bay.

Rich was born September 24, 1941, and spent all of his early life in the bay area. He lived on Olive Barber Road and attended Eastside grade school, Marshfield Jr. High, and was in the class of 1959 at Marshfield High School prior to joining the U.S. Army and being posted in Germany.

After his return to civilian life, Rich lived and worked in Roseburg for several years, then returned to Coos Bay where he married Cindy Elliott. He worked for Bracelin-Yeager for a time and eventually became a long haul driver for a company in Eugene where he remained until the time of his death.

He was preceded in death by both parents and a brother, Ron Barber.

He is survived by a son, Jay, who lives in Portland, a daughter, Amy Adams, who lives in Coos Bay, and a sister, Susan Jackson of Springfield. He also leaves four grandchildren and various nieces and nephews.

He was a devoted father, grandfather and friend.

Stay in Touch

Be sure to let us know if any of your contact information changes (address, etc.) so we can keep the files up to date. Listed below are changes that have been reported since the last issue:

Cheryl (Hood) Bighaus

Email: bighauss41@comcast.net

Ron (Howard) Gavisk

Email: ronproton@yahoo.com

Arlys Rood

Email: arlysg@charter.net