

DELIA BELLE PLASKETT OKSEN

Irma Oksen Reaves

1941

Ted and I had just finished eating breakfast. It was a beautiful Monday morning following a delightful Sunday, spent in San Francisco, when my brother, Lloyd, arrived at our house terribly upset. He had just returned home from El Centro the night before. He had been working for Garin Company as a truck driver.

Lloyd's family had been living in El Centro, California with him for the winter lettuce harvest. His wife, Delia Belle, and their three little boys, Ralph (age three), Jimmy (age five) and Lloyd (age eight, called "Sonny"), drove home to Watsonville in their car. They arrived home several hours before their daddy, who was driving the truck.

About 7:00 PM Delia told the boys that she was going to the grocery store to get some milk and bread. She put little Ralph in his high chair and then left in their car. Their daddy arrived home a little later and found his little boys alone and crying. Their mother had not returned.

Is it any wonder that Lloyd was upset? As he told us what had taken place the night before, we too were moved. The boys' maternal grandmother -- Grandma Plaskett -- kept them at her house that Monday night. Being impossible for her to continue to do so, Ted and I offered to care for them until their mother returned. We were so sure that she would soon be back as she was very devoted to her little ones and loved them dearly. However, we had no way of knowing that Delia Belle would never return to her husband and little family.

Grandma Plaskett felt as though it was her duty to care for her three little grandsons, but that circumstances did not permit it. (She later told me that it would mean giving up her job, as well as her Saturday night dances and dates.) However, she did come out several times to help with housework. She also gave us a few dollars from time to time to help offset the cost of her grandsons' clothes. This was welcome as these were trying times for Ted and me. Our income was pretty meager. Regardless, we welcomed our little nephews with open arms. They got the same love and care as our own two boys. Too, Nana was so happy to have them with us.

Delia Belle was a most beautiful girl -- fairly tall with a lovely physique. Her hair was golden auburn and naturally wavy. Her pretty brown eyes sparkled when she turned on her dimpled smile. A few, faint freckles across the bridge of her nose added much to her attractiveness. She well could have been a model.

A few months before, we had moved into our big home in Green Valley. My invalid mother and Chuck, a friend of ours, were living with us. Fortunately, we had room for our three little nephews. Of course they missed their mother but they seemed content to be with our two boys, Skippy and Bob.

A few days after Delia left, Lloyd received a letter and the car key telling him that he could find the car parked on a certain street near the beach and Giant Dipper in Santa Cruz. This letter was postmarked "San Jose." At that time letters were marked in the town or city in which they were mailed.

Being that Lloyd was working, Delia's mother and I drove to Santa Cruz to pick up the car. There were no clues or anything in the car to indicate her whereabouts.

Mothers' Day was on May 13th. Our dollars were limited but I did buy a pretty slip for the boys to send to their mother. Sonny wrote a little note to enclose in the package. We sent it to General Delivery, San Jose, California. Our return address was on the package so we knew that Delia received it OK, as it was not returned to us.

That gave Lloyd a clue. I suggested that he take a few days off and park in front of the main post office in San Jose each day to see if Delia went there to pick up mail. It was a wild guess but

Lloyd was rewarded the first day. She was very surprised to see him. She told him that she was working at a restaurant in San Jose. They went for a ride together. When he took her home to her apartment, she promised to meet him there the following Saturday and come back to visit the boys. At that time we all thought she would return to her home. Possibly she needed a little time away to think and relax.

With joy in his heart, Lloyd left that morning for their meeting, hoping and praying that she would come home to stay. It was a great disappointment when her landlady told him that his wife had never returned to her apartment since he left her there the week before. Although terribly upset, Lloyd would not give up hopes. He tried time and again to contact Delia. Each time the landlady met him with the same answer, "She hasn't been back."

Delia's rent had expired and the owners wanted the apartment to lease out. Her mother and I went to the apartment to remove Delia's few belongings that she had acquired since leaving home. We found the Mothers' Day underslip unwrapped but still in the box. The only things she took with her when she left home were the clothes on her back and little money. Needless to say that this was a very sad mission for her mother and me. I had never before seen Delia's mother cry. We both left the apartment with tear-stained cheeks and heavy hearts. I loved Delia very much. It was hard to understand why she would not contact her mother. She never did.

As time went by, we all waited anxiously for some word or knowledge of Delia's whereabouts. We contacted the Department of Motor Vehicles in Sacramento, but no luck. We notified her insurance company but they could not track her down. She had a small insurance policy with Sonny as beneficiary which the company wouldn't pay for seven years. (If the missing party was not located in that length of time, they were declared deceased.) We contacted all her friends and her sister, wishing for a thread of hope. Month after month passed and year after year. Our hopes dwindled but still we would not give up.

I came to the conclusion that her mind must have failed her. She went through a lifetime of sorrow in the eleven years she was married. She had three miscarriages, two crib deaths of babies when they were three months old, a four-month-old baby that starved to death from an overgrown stomach muscle, besides giving birth to her three precious, healthy boys. She was a beautiful and compassionate woman in spite of only being a child when she was married at the age of fourteen. (She should have been playing with dolls instead of bearing children.) Lloyd was then twenty years of age.

My brother drank quite heavily during those years as did Delia Belle. I'm sure she must have encountered much mental anguish. She had so much good in her. She was reaching for help as she often attended church alone on Sundays. If only we had known the circumstances, possibly we could have gotten some help for them both. I later found out that there was a history of alcoholism in the Plaskett family as well as in my own.

Ted and I were happy that we could have the boys here at the ranch with us. They seemed quite content to be with our boys.

It was very difficult for Lloyd to adjust. He lived with us for awhile. It was a help to be with his little ones. Time passed so fast and still no word or knowledge of Delia's whereabouts. Night after night my pillow was wet with tears. If only I had known her feelings or heartaches, maybe I could have been a little closer and given her some encouragement.

We enrolled Lloyd (Sonny) and Jimmy in the Green Valley School where Skippy (Ronnie) was attending. Before we realized it, it was time for little Ralph to start school, also. He was so cute! Whenever he could locate some wildflowers on his way home, he would bring me a little bouquet.

His little face beamed as he grinned with joy.

Before breakfast I would oversee their morning routine -- then line the four little boys up in a row and comb their hair with wave-set. This helped to keep their hair in place. I gave them a hair-cut every two weeks.

They all looked so nice as they trod off to school each morning in their neat, starched shirts and jeans, and their lunch pails in their hands. I would stand in the doorway and watch them until they were out of sight. Tears often welled up in my eyes as I breathed a prayer to God for letting us care for our three little nephews. If only their mother could see them I am sure she would return.

I never did give up hope. I decided that possibly Delia had made a new life for herself. If she had, I knew she never could forget her three little boys.

Delia's mother finally insisted that she was no longer alive. When her mother would make that remark, I would say, "I can't believe that. She will return someday." Now I wonder if Delia's mother had such a premonition.

After four years, my health failed and I was hospitalized for eight days. I was very weak and not able to carry on. When my doctor told me that we would have to find homes for the three nephews, it was a tremendous shock to me. Yet, I knew I was not able to continue. Dear God, why must this happen? We thought we were giving them a good home and care. Sure, it was extra work but I loved it. The joy and happiness they gave me compensated for all. We loved those little fellows so very much. They were like our very own.

We found a good home close by for the two younger boys with Mr. and Mrs. Miller. These were good Christian folks. In fact, they organized "The Little Worker's Class" which our four small boys attended over the years. It was a Sunday school class for all religions in our community. During World War^{II} it was held on week days after school. At their new home close by, we could visit them often and they could visit us. It was a full year before I regained my health.

To this day I regret having to give up Jimmy and Ralph. Sonny (Lloyd), then twelve years old, cried and begged to remain with us. He and Skip were very close and inseparable pals. Sonny was old enough to care for himself and help with the chores. He remained with us until he was twenty-one and married. Later Lloyd Sr., my brother, remarried and Jimmy and Ralph made their home with him.

During the time that we had the three nephews with us, it was so much joy. We took them camping at Arroyo Seco. Also, they were with us for a year when we lived at Big Sur during Ted's work in the US Forest Service. The following year Jimmy and Ralph spent part of the time with our very dear friends in Green Valley -- Pauline and Dick Crandall and their two boys, Jim and Richard.

1983

Delia Belle's disappearance left a deep scar on the hearts of us all throughout the years. What a terrible shock it was when I received a letter from Delia's aunt, Gladys Grizzell, on August 14 1983. She stated that her sister, Lil, (both of them sisters of Delia's mother, Ella Plaskett) had told her back in 1976 that she had read that a body of a young woman had been washed ashore on Santa Cruz Beach. The body had not been identified. Gladys had asked Lil why she didn't investigate it. Lil replied that she just couldn't. Gladys then asked if she had mentioned it to Delia's mother, Ella. Lil said, "No, I was too horrified."

By 1976 Gladys felt that it was too late to check on the body for the time lapse between 1941 and 1976 was too great. Gladys wanted to ask her sister, Ella, if she had heard such, but Ella was hospitalized at the time and died the following year.

This news really opened an old wound for me. Could it be possible that poor, little Delia could have taken her own life, or could she have met with foul play? Well, was there a body found after all? Could her mother have read the same news and concluded that Delia was dead? I immediately got on the phone and called the Santa Cruz Coroner's office. I explained to the coroner the information I was seeking. He informed me that he had no records of such. He suggested going through the Watsonville daily papers from that time.

I then called the Watsonville Public Library. They told me that they had all daily papers on microfilm from 100 years back. Donna, my daughter-in-law, and I spent three hours looking through Register-Pajaronian microfilms from April 1, 1941 to September 1, 1941. Nothing showed up.

Several days later we spent four hours at the Santa Cruz Public Library looking through microfilms of the Santa Cruz Sentinel, from April 1, 1941 to September 15, 1941. Again we found no clues.

I called the Coroner's office once again. This time a different party answered the phone. I asked him if he could suggest some way to follow up our search. He said that I may be able to get some information from the Santa Cruz County Recorder's office.

The clerk at the Recorder's office informed me that all records prior to 1955 had been destroyed in the 1955 flood. She suggested that I call the Bureau of Statistics in Santa Cruz. "However," she said, "they may not cooperate too well."

I had gone this far. I was determined to continue as long as there was a thread of hope. I called the Bureau of Statistics and explained the reason for my contacting them. The woman on the phone was very obliging. I gave her Delia Belle Plaskett Oksen's name. I waited on the phone while she scanned through the files of 1941 and 1942. Nothing showed up under that name. She then scanned the files for a Jane Doe for those two years. There was no record on file for an unidentified woman's body. To me, this looked like the end of the line in our search for Delia Belle.

In watching the "Fantasy" program on TV the last couple of months (in 1983), it amazed me how they were able to locate lost persons and unite them with their families. When they located a man who had been missing for forty-three years and brought him together with his family, it gave me a faint thread of hope. As a last resort I wrote to "Fantasy-Finder" to try to find our loved one after forty-two years. Then, all I could do was hope and pray.

There are some things worse than death, such as the uncertainty and wondering through all these years about someone you love, and who is loved by many others.

Unfortunately, the TV program "Fantasy" had gone off the air. Is this now the end of the search? Will we ever know? There is one thing I am sure about and that is, if Delia Belle is still alive, the good Lord is watching over her. If she is no longer living, she is safe in the arms of Jesus.

Tragedy

Whenever anyone needed a helping hand or a stand-by, Ted was right at their side. When Lloyd and Delia lost their three little babies, all under four months old, the shock to them was almost unbearable. Little Dorothy and a little boy, died in crib deaths. Ted was there to help. He

made funeral arrangements and all necessary support to try to lessen the burden and shock.

When little baby Louis was born, Delia Belle was unable to breast feed him. The various formulas that Dr. Oscar Marshall prescribed, little Louis could not keep down. I tried to persuade Delia to change doctors. She had so much faith in Dr. Marshall. She told me that he then was ordering a special formula from a San Francisco hospital. When this formula did not work, I asked her to have a consultation with Dr. Eiskamp. She still had faith in her pediatrician.

Several weeks later I stopped by their home. Delia was bathing little Louis. I could hardly believe what I saw. That little one was practically all bones with a layer of skin draped over them. To be truthful, I thought the baby was almost dead. I talked Delia into letting me rush the little fellow in to see Dr. Eiskamp. She gladly consented. Lloyd drove us to the doctor's office while I held the baby. Before we got there, I thought he had died in my arms.

The minute Dr. Eiskamp saw little Louis he said, "I'm positive that it's an overgrown stomach muscle." He immediately took the baby into his office and gave him a nursing bottle containing milk of bismuth. Lloyd and I watched through the fluoroscope as the little one nursed on the bottle. The fluid went as far as the stomach muscle. It then churned around and came up.

Dr. Eiskamp said, "There is only one chance in a thousand that this baby can survive an operation. As is, he will be gone shortly." The operation was the only chance, so Lloyd agreed to it.

Dr. Eiskamp operated on the baby immediately, at the hospital. He gave the baby a local anesthetic and a sugar tit. Lloyd, Delia, Ted and I stood by, waiting. Lloyd gave little Louis his blood for a transfusion.

The doctor warned us that the tissue covering the stomach muscle was very, very thin. If the knife should possibly cut too far, it could be fatal. The operation was a success. Dr. Eiskamp told us, "If the baby survives the next 24 hours, he will have a good chance of recovery."

Delia and Lloyd spent the night at our house. This was the first good night's rest they had had for some time. Little baby Louis survived the 24 hours, but was too weak and after 26 hours he died. Again another tragedy and heartache for Delia Belle and Lloyd.

All three of their babies are buried in the Oksen (my parent's) vault at the Pioneer Cemetery. No engravings or markers have been put on the vault cover.

Poor, dear Delia Belle. I can't help but believe that something must have snapped in her mind to abandon those three, adorable little boys she loved so dearly. Can a person experience three miscarriages, three baby deaths, and give birth to three wonderful boys, all in eleven years, without losing their normal mentality?

March 6, 1989

My thoughts have wandered back to April 1941 quite frequently of late. It has been difficult to dismiss the actions and disappearance of dear, little Delia Belle.

The eleven years of her married life must have been a series of griefs. She, as well as her husband, were so young when married. They knew very little of the hardships and pitfalls of life. When it was too late, I realized that Delia was asking for assistance. (Back in 1940 we had no clinic or Alcoholics Anonymous.)

Today I again phoned the Coroner's office in Santa Cruz, asking if he had records from 1940. His records only went back to 1951. He suggested that I call the Santa Cruz County Recorder's office, which I did. They had no record of finding a Delia Belle Plaskett Oksen. They suggested that I might try the Santa Cruz County Morgue to ask if an unidentified body had been found at

that date. When asking for the Santa Cruz County Morgue number from information, they stated that the Coroner's office is the morgue. This looks like the end of my quest -- an unsolved mystery. In all these forty-eight years there has been no trace of dear, little Delia Belle.

Vital Statistics Search

In April of 1989, Jane Borg, a local historian and a member of American University Women, informed me that the Bureau of Vital Statistics in Sacramento has a record of all deaths in California. I immediately sent for a form to fill out.

I received the form and filled in all data required, and sent it in along with a check for \$7.00 to cover the search fee. I also sent a letter giving Delia's age and description. These were mailed on April 17, 1989 -- requesting the search be made for the period of 1940 to 1950.

On June 6, 1989 I received a reply stating they had no record of Delia Belle Oksen's death.

I was disappointed as that was not what I had requested. I again wrote them saying that I wanted a search made for an unidentified young woman's body that had washed ashore on Santa Cruz Beach, in the early 1940s. All the details -- age, description, etc. -- I had previously stated in my first letter.

On Thursday, September 21, 1989, Sacramento Vital Statistics called me on the phone saying, "We do not have a record of your request, only deaths with names, nothing unidentified." No doubt this is the climax for the search for Delia Belle Oksen. Finale.

Had we known about the body that had washed ashore on the Santa Cruz Beach, and had we identified it as Delia Belle's, we would have laid the body to rest in the Oksen vault with her three small babies. However, and wherever, I'm sure that her spirit is with the dear Lord and her wee ones.

Irma Oksen Reaves
September 21, 1989