

THE BEGINNING

WEIGHING APPROXIMATELY 160 pounds, D.C. Caughran Jr. was five feet, ten inches tall. With his somewhat wavy brown hair, blue-gray eyes, and quick smile, he easily made friends. This ability was due in large part to his role as the youngest sibling and only son, as well as three, very protective older sisters.

On December 22, 1921, D.C. was born in Forney, Texas, to D.C. Caughran Sr. and Cordelia Johnston Caughran. He was raised in the neighboring, and much smaller, Chisholm, a community about twenty-five miles east of Dallas. While Cordelia had given birth to his older sisters at home, D.C. was the first in his family to be born in a hospital. His sisters were Dorothy Dee (born in 1914 and often referred to as DD), Mary Alice (born in 1917) and Mildred (born in 1920). Because only eighteen months separated D.C. and Mildred, they were close emotionally. When Mildred started school, she often came home before the end of the school day because of some unknown "ailment." Moments after returning home and walking in the door, she would become oblivious to her prior ills and start playing with her little brother.

The land surrounding Chisholm is primarily prairie, with some hardwood timber located throughout the area. Most of the farms were relatively small (approximately fifty acres) and grew cotton as the primary source of income. Several of D.C.'s letters home refer to the cotton crop, in particular the current price and the weather. In one letter he even stated that, once he got out of the army and returned home to Chisholm, he might plant a cotton crop. On more than one occasion he mentioned how he wanted to invest the money he was putting away in

war bonds. To many people from rural Texas, cotton farming seemed like a logical investment or even a career choice although I never really imagined D.C. as a farmer.

During D.C.'s youth, Chisholm, an unincorporated town in the southeast corner of Rockwall County, had a population of about seventy-five people. The black land along this stretch of Texas State Highway 205 was well suited for cotton farming. Although located in Rockwall County, most of the business outside of Chisholm was conducted in nearby Terrell, in Kaufman County. Terrell was a larger community than Rockwall, and although farther away, it provided more business opportunities (e.g., banking, feed mill, picture show, cafés). However, when it came to keeping up with the local news, D.C.'s newspaper of choice was the *Rockwall Success*.

The majority of D.C.'s "growing-up" years took place during the Great Depression. Life was hard for most people then, both financially and physically. Most of the children did not recognize the difficulty, however, because they knew little else.

The town of Chisholm boasted two general stores. The Tapp family owned one, and D.C.'s parents operated the other, which was known as the Caughran Brothers. (D.C. Senior had two brothers, Tom and Denny, both of whom owned an interest in the store.) The Masonic Hall was located above one of the general stores, while the other general store housed the post office. As most general stores during those times, Caughran Brothers sold piece goods, school supplies, and groceries. Cordelia kept the books and posted the records about once a week. Later, while still a young boy, D.C. took over the task of record keeping and preparing the bills since many of the customers came in once a month to pay what they could.

The small community also had a cotton gin, a blacksmith shop, two churches (Methodist and, of course, Baptist), a Masonic lodge, and a new five-room brick schoolhouse. Unfortunately, shortly after the new school was built, it was decided that the older students would be bused to the high school in Rockwall, thus negating the need for at least three of those rooms. However, they were put to good use for community events and provided outstanding storage for the teachers and students.

On a not-so-long-ago Saturday morning in Terrell, Texas, I was in

the comfortable old City Barbershop. Today it no longer offers bath facilities for its customers as many barbershops did decades previously, especially for those male patrons who came to town once a week on Saturday or even less frequently. Not many of those present that particular Saturday morning knew me since I did not grow up in Terrell, and my own barber (who by chance was also my cousin) in Wills Point had recently retired. Although I have not lived in neighboring Wills Point for more than thirty years, I continued using the same barber, F. G. Hardy. Thus as a new customer, I enjoyed a certain anonymity while listening to the stories that bounced off the walls of the venerable establishment. Especially in a small town, men are more prone to change their doctor than their barber. It's a very personal relationship. Even as one loses his hair, he keeps his barber. Also, I still like the idea of the barbershop as primarily an all-male business with the customary dated *Field and Stream* magazines lying about and an occasional roughly folded local newspaper.

During my visit, one of the more senior patrons, perhaps in his mid-to-late seventies, wore a relatively new ball cap that designated him as a World War II navy veteran. He talked about attending Rockwall High School and playing football against some of the surrounding communities near Chisholm, including Wills Point. Near the end of his monologue and at an appropriate point, I told him that my father-in-law was from Chisholm. It was logical to assume that, since he and D.C. would have been close to the same age, they would have known one another.

He asked who my father-in-law was, and I told him. He did not say a word at first. In fact, I think he forgot to breathe for a brief moment. He just looked at me with his mouth slightly open, and you could tell that he was trying to decide how to respond. I had said something that he had obviously not expected. He did not seem shocked by my statement. It was just unanticipated. A flood of memories that had not been summoned in many years must have suddenly rushed by him. In a somewhat awkward moment, I proceeded to introduce myself. He then told me that his name was James Lovell.¹

With eyes that appeared more intense than a moment earlier, Mr. Lovell informed me that he not only knew D.C. but had attended my

wedding to Sarah almost thirty years earlier. Yes, he knew D.C. and knew him well. He told me that D.C. had helped him find his first real job sometime after returning home from the navy and World War II. (After D.C.'s discharge from the army, he had worked for the Texas Employment Commission (now the Texas Workforce Commission) in Terrell, where he focused initially on placing veterans in jobs.²)

Lovell said that, upon his relocation to Terrell after leaving years earlier to work in grocery stores in East Texas, D.C. often came by to visit in Lovell's store, usually later in the evening when business was slow. Of course, D.C. went to the store under the pretext of needing a loaf of bread or some other miscellaneous item.

On one particular visit, as D.C. entered the store, he motioned to Lovell, as he often did, to meet him at the back of the store when he had a moment. After Lovell finished with a customer, he made his way to where D.C. was going through the motions of contemplating goods on the shelf. On this occasion and after the initial small talk, D.C. mentioned that, at the start of each month, Lovell's father was always the first or second person to pay his bill at the family's general store in Chisholm. Not everyone did that—or could. Obviously this little trait of the senior Mr. Lovell touched D.C. because it was an indication of his integrity and character.

Especially during the Depression era, it seemed that, with no money, reputation was all that people could call their own, and that is perhaps why business was done with a handshake and a person's word. We have lost so much of that in today's world.

James Lovell then related to me that, when he was in grade school in Chisholm, his teacher told him that he needed ten cents to buy a school notebook. Young James went home and told his dad. Unfortunately, money was tight, as it was for everyone. The elder Lovell did not have the money, but he told James to go to the general store and see Mr. Caughran, who would advance him the dime. The next morning James was at the store even before Mr. Caughran. When Caughran arrived at the front door, young Lovell told him why he needed the dime and asked whether he would charge the Lovell family's account for the ten cents. Before James even walked through the door, Mr. Caughran looked down at him and of course said yes. Caughran reached into his

pocket, handed James the dime, and never said another word about it. That was the type of community Chisholm (and most of rural Texas) was more than two lifetimes ago. Neighbors took care of each other.

Much of the surrounding area was made up of people who, like the Lovells, made their living off the land but lacked the benefit or satisfaction of ownership. These sharecroppers' primary goal was to put food on the table in the short run and to someday own the land they worked day after day.

The life of a sharecropper knew no barriers of race. Although many people think of only African Americans as sharecroppers, many whites also shared that distinction. Their plight was similar: They worked land they did not own. They shared the crop production with the owner and literally had sweat equity in their endeavors.

In many cases, as partial compensation for their labor, the owner provided a house for the sharecroppers on the same land they worked. With outdoor toilet facilities and limited indoor plumbing, the house met only minimum standards, however.

A garden provided fresh vegetables that were shared with neighbors. Although the typical family regularly "ate out of the garden," living within any kind of budget was nearly impossible. In fact, there was no budget. One had to have money to plan a budget, and this was just not the case. Fortunately, seldom did the children recognize their predicament. The adults persevered, and, often over time, many earned enough money to purchase their own farm.

In addition to the general store, D.C.'s parents owned a small gasoline station directly across the Terrell-to-Rockwall state highway, which by today's standards was nothing more than a road. Some days D.C. worked both locations at the same time—without assistance. On one such occasion, while trying to rush from the store to the filling station to service a waiting car, he was struck by an oncoming vehicle as he ran across the road. It happened quickly: At the last possible second he jumped onto the car, rolled over the hood, and kept running—with little break in stride. Young D.C. was very fortunate that cars did not travel at the speed they do today. He was more worried about what his father would say about not paying attention (i.e., looking both ways) than about almost getting killed.

Other than the cotton gin and general stores, Chisholm witnessed little other business activity on a daily basis. However, D.C. enjoyed working in the family store and seeing all the folks that came through town, usually on their way to either Rockwall or Terrell. For tiny Chisholm, these establishments were the center of the universe. With the exception of a family outing to the larger neighboring towns, the townspeople needed little else.

Once D.C. told a story of a family car trip to Rockwall. The car was of the vintage that was very open, not closed in like the more popular sedans of the late thirties. For her only son Mrs. Cordie had purchased a cloth cap that went very nicely, she thought, with his Sunday clothes, which were also worn when they went to town to shop or visit friends. Unfortunately, D.C. could not convince his well-meaning mother that this cap was not appropriate for a boy of his advanced years (he was not yet ten). As you can imagine, in the open car on its way to Rockwall, somehow (when his parents were not looking) that cap left his head with a vengeance and ended up alongside the road.

Upon arrival in Rockwall, D.C.'s mother noticed that his lovely store-bought cap was missing. Distressed at the loss, she tried to convince D.C. Senior that they should immediately turn around and hunt for the cap. However, Junior could not remember exactly where it blew off his head and suggested that a return now would be a futile exercise even though he too was "disappointed" and would miss the fine-looking cap. Certainly someone would already have found it. The family would be much better off finishing their business in Rockwall and looking for it on the way home. The good news is that D.C. did not have to wear the cap again. The bad news was that his mother might buy another one. D.C. never did admit to his parents that, when no one was looking, he took that cap off and threw it as hard as he could away from the moving vehicle. He did not want to see it again, and he certainly did not want to be seen in it.

Sometimes when D.C. was bored on Sundays and especially during the hot, sticky summers, he opened up the store and sold soft drinks and a few grocery items. At this time in Texas, dry goods were not allowed to be sold because of "blue laws," which prohibited such sales on Sunday. Since not everyone had iceboxes for soft drinks, on hot afternoons,

going to the general store was a way of sharing the discomfort and occasional boredom with friends and neighbors.

One unique talent of D.C.'s was his ability to mentally add a series of four-digit numbers as fast as one would normally talk and give the correct total on the spot. I occasionally tested him on this gift, sometimes throwing a dozen numbers at him, and he was never wrong. I asked him whether anyone had ever questioned his totals when working in the store, and he said not that he could recall. Later on, D.C. graduated from Rockwall High School.

A great deal of evidence indicates that D.C. Senior (often referred to as D-Boy or just D by family and friends) did not have profit as the primary motive in some of his business ventures. He once obtained a franchise to sell farm implements. Money was difficult to come by for D.C. Senior's neighbors, and some of the farmers paid their bills only once a year—after their crops “came in.” In order to help them out, he sold this needed equipment to them at cost. This practice did not last long, however. Once the farm implement company discovered that he was drastically undercutting the prices of their other dealers in the area, the company pulled his franchise. Nevertheless, D.C. Senior never regretted his actions.

In the early years of the Depression, D.C. Senior lost two farms. One was near the small community of Fate, in eastern Rockwall County, and the other north of Chisholm, closer to Rockwall.³ This was the result of his custom of giving so much credit to his customers. Although some of them could not pay their bills, D.C. Senior still had to pay his suppliers. The vendors were not as lenient in extending credit. It is hard to know—or appreciate—what this sacrifice meant to the Caughran family or their neighbors.

From a psychological standpoint, losing land is not an easy thing. For those that work the land, finally owning a piece of it means becoming a part of it. The land is almost sacred, and the only thing more important is family. (Although I never saw it with the Caughrans, some people believe land and money are more important than family or friends.) The goal was to accumulate land—and almost never to sell it. For many of that generation and even the next, land defined people and even gave them, at times, a quiet status.

For D.C. Senior to lose his farms so others could continue to meet their basic needs with items from the general store was more than an act of kindness. Fifty and even sixty years later someone would mention to D.C.'s sisters, Mildred and Mary Alice, how much D.C. Senior had helped them during the Depression. Without his generosity they would not have had food on the table or thread to mend the worn-out overalls.

After graduating from Rockwall High School, D.C. attended John Tarleton Junior College (a member of the Texas A&M College system) in Stephenville, Texas. From Tarleton, D.C. often hitchhiked home. During those years, it was common to hitchhike, which was quite easy, especially for a boy in uniform. At Tarleton, D.C. was a member of the U.S. Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), which was mandatory for all male students. The young men were required to wear uniforms at all times on campus and at school functions. They also frequently wore the uniform when traveling to and from school.

While at college, D.C. wrote a composition about what was to become his last hitchhiking experience. In 1939 this was the sole means of transportation for many of the male students in Erath County who were attending John Tarleton Junior College. Although the travel schedule was somewhat uncertain, most of the students eventually got to their intended destination. Hitchhikers also met a variety of characters. Some were families; others were farmers, businessmen, doctors, or lawyers going about their various activities. Up to this point, D.C. had always considered himself lucky in the rides he received. Some of those who picked the students up even expected the hitchhiker to drive. This was especially true of men who had been driving for a long period of time and wanted to rest. In this way D.C. had an opportunity to experience several types of cars. If a tire went flat, the hitchhiker would normally fix it or at least help; this type of mishap always seemed to happen when D.C. was in his biggest hurry to get home.

On one of those Friday evenings D.C. left the campus around sundown but thought he could still get home at a reasonable hour, especially if he got a ride quickly and they drove fast enough. After patiently sticking his right thumb out for the world to see and after several vehicles

had left him standing in a shroud of dust, a car finally stopped, well after dark. The man behind the wheel pulled over suddenly and told D.C. to get into the car. At this time of the evening, the air was turning cold, and the ride was most welcome. After several miles D.C. realized that perhaps he had caught a ride with the wrong person. The driver had a revolver stuck in his belt and another within easy reach elsewhere in the car. Rifles and sidearms were not all that uncommon, but if you carried a weapon, seldom did you pack more than one. Although this was not the Old West, the days of Bonnie and Clyde were still fresh in many people's memories in this part of the state.

The driver eventually told D.C. that the police were looking for him and that he wanted D.C. to ride with him through the towns along the way so that he would not attract any attention. Because D.C. was in his army ROTC uniform, the car and its driver were thus less suspicious to any law enforcement officer who might be observing cars traveling through the area. The man did not say what towns he wanted D.C. to ride through or how far he was going. They were at least headed toward Fort Worth at the moment, and that was the right direction.

After passing through Weatherford, Fort Worth, and other towns several miles away, D.C. began thinking about an exit strategy for his current predicament. As they continued east and passed through Dallas, they stopped for gasoline. When the driver went into the filling station to hopefully pay for the gasoline, D.C. grabbed his small bag and ran. He was not sure where he was headed. He was just running from a situation that had the potential of turning into a really bad day. As soon as he could, he reported the driver to the police but never heard what became of him. After that incident, D.C.'s hitchhiking days were over. That night in Dallas he caught a slow bus for the remainder of his thirty-five-mile trip to Terrell.

When thinking about the future, D.C. was unsure what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. All of his sisters became schoolteachers. Mildred and Mary Alice graduated from East Texas State Teachers College in Commerce, Texas (now Texas A&M University–Commerce). After two years of college at John Tarleton, D.C. transferred to the University of Texas (UT) in Austin. Although Commerce was much closer to

Chisholm (about fifty miles to the northeast), he did not want to teach, and even though he could have majored in business, D.C. found the buzz of the state capital and of course the much larger university a good deal more interesting.

While attending UT, D.C. lived in a boarding house near campus. He enjoyed the social aspects of school, while academics were a secondary consideration at the time. By today's standards, "social" in this context was very low-key. Except for the two years in Stephenville, D.C. had spent his whole life in Chisholm, and the sheer size of Austin presented numerous opportunities to meet new people and have fresh experiences. During this time D.C. also became an avid sports fan, especially when it came to football. In his letters home while in the army, he often referred to the success of the UT football team.

Unfortunately, not too long after D.C.'s enrollment at the University of Texas, World War II began for the United States. As expected, D.C. received the following greeting from the government: "June 29, 1942— From the Selective Service, 1st National Bank Building, Rockwall, Texas, D.C. is now classified by the Local Board as '1-A.' His Order No. is 10,164. M.W. Briscoe." I do not know exactly how D.C. reacted to this small and, on quick glance, insignificant post card. However, World War II was different from prior and even later conflicts. In the



A confident D.C. Jr. with his mother and sister Mildred a few days before his induction into the U.S. Army.



This photograph of D.C. Jr. with his sister Mary Alice, nephew Dan, Mildred, and Dorothy Dee was taken immediately prior to his departure for induction into the U.S. Army.

latter days of the Vietnam War, I received a similar postcard. Although I knew it was coming, that 1-A classification nevertheless evoked a feeling of uncertainty and discomfort. Later the order came to report for a military physical. D.C. knew that his world was about to change significantly.

Before the end of summer 1942 D.C. was drafted into the U.S. Army. He never returned to UT to finish his degree.